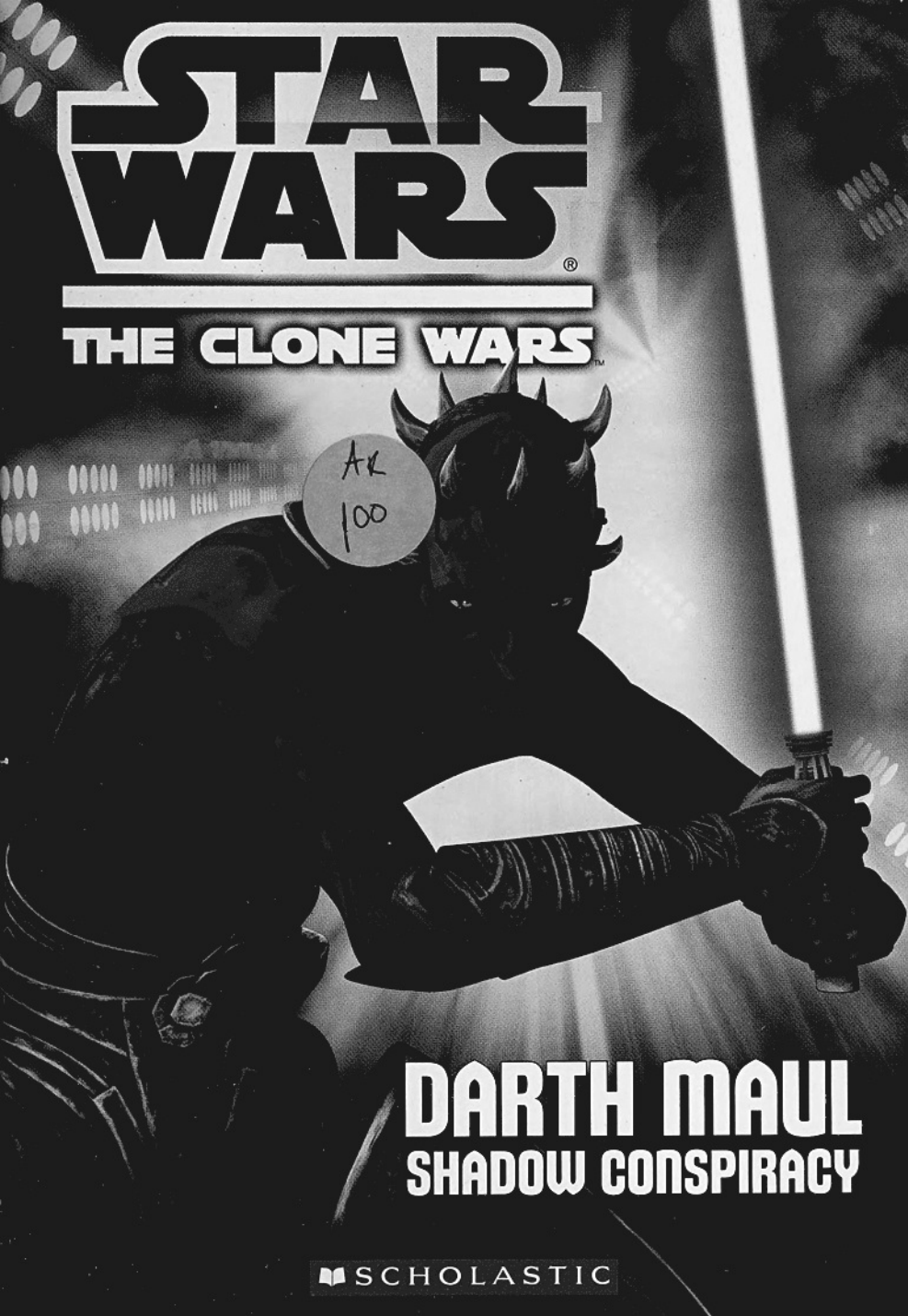

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DARTH MAUL
SHADOW CONSIPIRACY

By Jason Fry

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Contents


PART ONE:
REVIVAL

CHAPTER ONE



Unlike the vast majority of the galaxy's flesh-and-blood beings, security droids didn't get bored or scared. They were content to patrol the Cybloc Transfer Station, their electronic eyes surveying the same corridors, warehouses, and offices they saw every night.

On this particular night the power went out, plunging the station into darkness. But the security droids weren't worried. Their computer brains calmly switched to high alert, elevating the threat level expected by one step and increasing the sensitivity of their monitoring sensors.

Four droids entered one of the warehouse's many offices. The station's emergency lighting glimmered on the black-and-white plating encasing their circuits.

The warehouse was empty.

"Fan out—I want a scan of the entire perimeter," ordered the lead deputy, whose designation was LD-112. His plating was gold and black, so the station's organic workers could look at a group of droids and tell who was in charge.

The droids began scanning the area, blasters ready.

"SD-357, have you found anyone in the south passage?" LD-112 asked, photoreceptors glowing. While waiting for a response, he took a moment to run through a list of potential reasons for the power outage. It was a long list. MALFUNCTION and SOLAR FLARE were at the top. INTRUSION and ACT OF WAR were at the bottom.

LD-112 reached out to open the door on the other side of the empty office. He peered down the corridor and saw it was empty as well.

"Three-fifty-seven, where are you?" LD-112 asked.

Suddenly, an object flew into view at the end of the corridor. LD-112's visual sensors took a few milliseconds to examine it, then forwarded their analysis to his central processing unit, which concluded with 99.35 percent confidence that the object was the body of a security droid. Further

analysis determined that there was a 91.21 percent chance that the body was that of SD-357.

Behind the fallen security droid stood a dark figure. The legs were mechanical, ending in four claws, while the rest of the body was apparently organic. The face was black with red tattoos, fiery yellow eyes, and a crown of curved, wicked-looking horns. In its hand was a lightsaber with a crimson blade.

The newcomer speared the fallen security droid, which expired in a shower of sparks.

A flesh-and-blood guard might have panicked at that point, but LD-112's electronic brain allowed him to perform several tasks in less than a quarter of a second.

First, he marked SD-357 as in need of serious maintenance and likely no longer functional. This alerted headquarters of the need to reorder replacement parts, and possibly a new droid.

Second, his sensors scanned the dark figure, searching several databases for a match. Searches against station workers, current ship crews, and known galactic criminals all came back with INSUFFICIENT DATA.

Third, he erased most of the list of potential reasons for the power outage and moved INTRUSION to the top.

Fourth, he yelled, "INTRUDERS!" and charged into the hallway, firing his blaster.

"You are trespassing on intergalactic—" he warned.

LD-112 never reached the intruder. Suddenly, he was in the air, though his sensors failed to determine why. Then his metal head was collapsing in on itself, crushed by some unseen pressure. He was logging a request for emergency maintenance when the main and auxiliary power cables to his brain snapped and his logic modules went offline.

Darth Maul strode into the office on his mechanical legs, still holding the droid deputy in the air with the Force. Behind him came another horned warrior, thickly muscled and covered with yellow tattoos. He was holding a double-bladed saber.

The new arrival, Savage Opress, slashed through one of the security droids, then raised his head, lifting the two remaining droids into the air. Their legs kicked briefly before he called upon the Force and slammed them against the wall.

Maul let LD-112's motionless body drop and the two Zabraks began to search the office. A safe stood in the corner. Savage plunged his saber into the locking mechanism. When the safe's metal housing bubbled around the plasma blade, Savage deactivated his saber and opened the safe.

Inside were credit chips—hundreds of them.

Savage grinned.

"Look, brother—a fortune," he said, his voice a low growl.

Maul was unimpressed.

"True fortune will be the demise of Kenobi," he said. His voice was smooth and mannered. He sounded like a well-educated son from a rich family in the Core Worlds, not a fiery-eyed warrior who broke into warehouses in the Outer Rim and ran droids through with a lightsaber.

Maul nodded at the credit chips.

"Credit chips are meaningless without a plan to survive," Maul told Savage. "The Jedi will hunt us. We will be forced to make a stand."

"And we will deal with them," Savage said.

"There are too many," Maul replied. "To continue, we need one singular vision. *My* vision."

Savage drew his shoulders back, his massive chest forward.

"Brother, let us share our strength," he said. "There is no need for dominance between us."

Savage's words sounded calm, reasonable. But Maul noticed his brother's body language. It was different than what Savage was saying. It told him Savage was prepared to fight.

In response, Maul also drew himself up to his full height, the motors in his mechanical legs whirring.

"Always two there are, my brother," Maul said. "A Master and an apprentice. And you are the apprentice."

Maul turned away, but heard the snap-hiss of Savage igniting his lightsaber.

"So it is time for a lesson," Maul said calmly.

Savage's saber howled as he flung himself at his brother in a brutal attack. The assault would have ended with most opponents cut in two and lying on the deck in lifeless halves. But Darth Maul was not most opponents. He parried Savage's slash effortlessly, their red saber blades sparking and chattering where they came in contact with each other. Then Maul twitched his wrists and spun Savage's saber out of his hands. A moment later Savage was lying on the deck, pinned by Maul's metal foot.

"You have grown so powerful," Savage said in amazement, staring up at his brother.

Maul paused for a moment, wondering if that were true. He let the memories come flooding back.

His training under the Sith Lord Darth Sidious, a childhood that was a blur of fear and pain, until he learned to control the fear and no longer noticed the pain.

His elation when Sidious unleashed him upon the galaxy, knowing he was eager to avenge the Sith's ancient defeat by crossing sabers with their Jedi enemies.

His satisfaction at seeing the Jedi Qui-Gon Jinn fall, mortally wounded by Maul's own Sith saber.

His dismay and disbelief to find himself plummeting helplessly into the depths of the planet Naboo, cut in half at the waist by Qui-Gon's apprentice, Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Maul should have died that day, but his rage and hatred had allowed him to fight back against fate, to summon the Force and survive. He had fallen, but he had lived. Somehow he had survived, making his way across the Outer Rim to the junk piles of Lotho Minor. There he had dwelled amid trash and madness, remembering only that he'd been ruined and cheated.

And there, he'd been found by Savage—a brother he hadn't known existed. Savage had brought him out of the darkness and back to Dathomir—his homeworld when he was an infant, before Sidious took him. The Nightsister witch Mother Talzin had used her arts to heal him. She had restored his memories, or at least the ones that could be recovered. She had replaced his rusty spiderlike legs with better ones, more suitable for the Sith warrior he once again knew himself to be.

And now Kenobi would pay—Kenobi, and then so many others. Savage was right. Maul's power was growing, because he had a purpose again, and a vision.

Maul kept his clawed foot on Savage's chest for another moment, to make sure both of them understood who was the Master and who was the apprentice. Then he shut off his saber and stepped away from his fallen brother.

"I shall complete your training," Maul said, extending his hand to help Savage to his feet. "Not as your brother, but as your Master."



CHAPTER TWO

The distress signal is coming from here—the Meridian sector," Obi-Wan Kenobi told Adi Gallia. "Cybloc system."

Their tri-winged *Eta*-class shuttle had just emerged from hyperspace, winking into existence not far from Cybloc Prime, the system's third planet. Adi sat in the pilot's chair—Obi-Wan was infamous in the Jedi Order for his dislike of flying, which he regarded as a task best left for droids. Adi, for her part, was one of the Order's best pilots, having led a squadron of Jedi starfighters into battle above Geonosis under the call sign Shooting Star.

Adi's brown eyes narrowed as she threaded the shuttle through Cybloc's necklace of moons, verifying that they were on the correct heading for Cybloc XII. She slid the shuttle into the moon's upper atmosphere, keeping one eye on the scopes as she considered their pursuit of Darth Maul and Savage Opress.

"It is close enough to the earlier attack," Adi said.

"I have a feeling it's them," Obi-Wan agreed.

Master Yoda had been the first to feel the disturbance in the Force. Through meditation, he had discovered its source—Obi-Wan's ancient enemy had somehow returned from the dead. Obi-Wan had been shocked, and certain Yoda was wrong. Hadn't he literally cut Darth Maul in two, watching as the two halves of the Sith warrior's body tumbled into the depths of Naboo?

But events had soon proved Yoda correct. The holographic message had come from the remote world of Raydonia. It had been terrible to watch. As the Jedi looked on in horror, Maul slaughtered an entire village of helpless people, and promised to do far worse if Obi-Wan didn't come to face him—and do so alone. Obi-Wan had agreed to do so, determined that this time he would finish what he'd started.

Obi-Wan still remembered his first sight of Maul on Raydonia—in fact, he doubted he would ever be able to forget

it. The ruined Sith warrior had stood on a roof, surrounded by burning buildings, and stared down at him.

"You may have forgotten me, but I will never forget you," Maul had said in that strangely beautiful voice that should have belonged to a diplomat or a HoloNet media star. "You cannot imagine the depths I would go to to stay alive, fueled by my singular hatred for you."

Then they had fought—and Obi-Wan had been ambushed by another old enemy, the Zabrak warrior Savage Opress. The two Zabraks had overpowered Obi-Wan and dragged him onto their ship. Only the intervention of the assassin Asajj Ventress—Count Dooku's former apprentice and Obi-Wan's sworn enemy—had saved him from whatever dark plan Maul had for him.

After that the Jedi had sought everywhere for word of Maul and Savage. There were rumors that Maul was on the shadow world of Umbara, pursuing some secret agenda. Then reports began coming in from across the Outer Rim—two horned and tattooed warriors, murdering and pillaging, leaving chaos and terror in their wake. And now, if the reports were correct, their crime spree had taken them here, to Cybloc.

The teal hull of Cybloc Transfer Station appeared ahead, atop a tower that rose from Cybloc's surface far below. Adi docked the shuttle and they made their way through the

station's corridors to the warehouse, where Superintendent Morlimur Snugg was waiting for them. Snugg was a Snivvian, a snaggletoothed alien with black eyes and wide nostrils from the distant planet Cadomai, wearing a blue jumpsuit. He led them into the wrecked office, indicating the disabled security droids and the empty safe.

"They oughta be flush—chips were all unlocked, no way to trace 'em," Snugg said. His speech had the frontier twang of the Outer Rim. "All done by two of the crabbiest Zabraks this side of the Hydian."

"They were alone?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Yup," Snugg said. "What were they? Couple of Jedi gone rogue?"

Obi-Wan and Adi shared a look.

"They're not Jedi," Obi-Wan said.

The superintendent frowned, his eyes settling on Obi-Wan's lightsaber, where it hung from his belt.

"Spark up that lightsaber for me," he said.

That wasn't the way most civilians addressed a Jedi, Obi-Wan thought with mild amusement. But he liked Snugg's no-nonsense manner, and figured he must have some reason for wanting an up-close look at an ignited lightsaber.

Obi-Wan hefted the hilt of his saber and activated the blade. It flared to life, a meter of brilliant blue energy.

"Mm-hmm," said Snugg. "The droids that got attacked said that theirs were red."

If he'd thought the two Jedi would be surprised by this, he was wrong.

"They are Sith, and we need to find them before they strike again," Obi-Wan said gravely.

"Well, they took my cargo ship," Snugg replied. "The droid survivors said they heard something about the Sertar sector."

Adi considered that. The Sertar sector was farther out in the Outer Rim, toward the galactic edge. Its worlds were mostly poor, backwater planets on little-used trade routes. It seemed an odd destination for a pair of Sith warriors flush with credits. But Obi-Wan didn't look surprised.

"What is in the Sertar sector?" Adi asked Obi-Wan, puzzled.

"That's where Florrum is," Obi-Wan replied.

"You've been there?" Adi asked. "What can we expect?"

Obi-Wan's blue eyes twinkled with amusement at some private thought.

"Pirates," he said.

CHAPTER THREE



Above the dull orange globe of the planet Florrum, a *Corona*-class Armed Frigate whirled through space. In the cockpit of the saucer-shaped attack ship, the Weequay pirate Jiro stared out the viewport, eyeing the cargo ship drifting ahead. It was a slab-sided freighter with offset engine pods. Markings on its side read ALC-9.

An Aurore*-class freighter,* thought Jiro. *Curious.*

But then, Jiro reminded himself, a lot of curious things could happen to a starship crossing the unimaginable distances between the stars. Hyperdrives malfunctioned. Life-support

systems broke down. Crew members mutinied. Lost ships were found decades or centuries later, or never heard from again.

Whatever the reason the freighter was adrift, it was her crew's bad luck to be adrift *here.* Florrum was the territory of Jiro's boss, the Weequay pirate Hondo Ohnaka, and Hondo's gang made a good living intercepting merchant ships and shuttles traveling in this part of the galaxy. The cargoes were resold or divided among Hondo's pirates as booty. The passengers were held for ransom—if they looked valuable enough that somebody would pay for their safe return.

And if they didn't? Well, that was more bad luck.

"Get me a readout on that ship," Jiro ordered the rest of his Weequay crew. The pirates were clad in mismatched pieces of armor, their hair bound up in topknots above their leathery faces, which were pierced with jewelry and marked with tattoos.

"There are life-forms aboard," one of the Weequays said.

"The main reactor and hyperdrive generator are down," another pirate said, looking up from his console. "I think they're stranded."

Jiro laughed. With the cargo ship's critical systems malfunctioning, anyone aboard would be desperate. Well, that was too bad for them. They'd soon find out there were worse things than being stranded.

"And their communications?" Jiro asked.

"Operational, but silenced," a pirate said.

Interesting, Jiro thought. Perhaps the crew was already unconscious, or had given up hope and stopped calling for rescue. Either way, it didn't matter.

"We'll kill anyone on board and take the ship," Jiro said with a grin. "Let's hope they have a wealth of cargo."

The other Weequays grinned back. Hondo insisted taking prisoners was better business than shooting them, but his pirates disliked it. Prisoners were annoying. They panicked and begged and had to be guarded, all of which cut into time better spent on pirate activities such as drinking grog and telling lies.

The pirate ship slowed, docking with the crippled freighter. Jiro and his men marched through the airlock into the hold, which was filled with neatly ordered crates. Jiro pried one open. It was filled with heavy blaster pistols. Another pirate looked up eagerly from a crate he'd opened.

"Pure sansanna spice," he said with a grin.

"Hondo will be pleased," Jiro said. He'd feared the ship might be a slaver: Zygerrians and Thalassians, among others, favored *Aurores* for running slaves. But blasters and spice were easy to transport, and worth more than even he had dared to imagine.

"We drink tonight!" Jiro shouted happily. "Now find me those life-forms—"

Two snap-hisses sounded at the other end of the cargo hold. Startled, Jiro turned and saw two horned warriors standing there, the red glare of their lightsabers making them look like creatures out of a nightmare.

"Jedi!" Jiro yelled.

Blasterfire crackled through the hold. The two warriors deflected the bolts effortlessly. Within seconds the one with red tattoos had seized Jiro by the throat, while the one with yellow tattoos loomed over the other pirates, double-bladed saber held menacingly.

"Do you want to live?" Darth Maul asked Jiro.

Suddenly, Jiro couldn't breathe. His windpipe was being crushed. He stared into the Sith warrior's burning eyes.

"Yes," Jiro gasped. "Very badly."

Maul gestured and the terrible pressure on Jiro's throat was gone.

Savage Opress had opened a safe, turning it so the pirates could see inside. It was filled with credit chips.

"We will make you rich," Savage growled.

"Your skills and talents could serve us well," Maul added. "The choice is yours."

The pirates looked at one another in disbelief. Moments

ago they had been prepared to die. Now they weren't quite sure what was happening.

"Are you . . . are you hiring us?" Jiro asked, thinking this had to be a trick. "What kind of Jedi are you?"

Maul's eyes seemed to burn even more intensely.

"We're not Jedi," he said. "We are lords—crime lords."

Jiro glanced at the safe, thinking to himself that anyone casually showing that many credits probably had a lot more of them lying around. And anyway, if the two warriors were going to kill them, it already would have happened. That meant he could bargain a little.

"We work for Hondo," Jiro said. "You'll have to pay us really well to get us to betray him."

"Money is of no object for men like us," Maul said. "You will have all that you desire and more—if you pledge yourselves to me."

Jiro thought about it. There was such a thing as pushing your luck, he decided. And some choices weren't really choices at all.

"All right," Jiro said. "I'm tired of working for Hondo anyway. I'll call up a couple of the boys and see if they'll join us."

Maul smiled.



CHAPTER FOUR

Hours later, two more *Corona*-class pirate ships had docked with Jiro's ship and the cargo hauler. The captains Jiro had summoned muttered and exchanged nervous looks when they saw the fearsome, half-mechanical Maul and the hulking Savage. But they also saw the crates of blasters and spice, and the piles of credit chips.

"I am certain Captain Hondo will never throw in with you," said the Weequay pirate named Sabo, glancing over at where Savage stood with his lightsaber unlit, but at the ready.

Jiro frowned. Sabo had always been stubborn.

"Hondo's base will soon be ours," Maul warned. "And he will not survive this—unless he embraces the same choice I give you now."

"Ha, I'm in," said Jiro, hoping to get some of the new pirates to commit.

"So am I," rumbled Goru, a hulking Weequay wearing a high-collared vest.

"I'm not sure," said Sabo. "Let's see what Hondo says about that."



Hondo Ohnaka was working at his cluttered office desk when the transmission came in from orbit. He eyed the two tattooed warriors, giving momentary thanks that they were up in space and not down here on the plains of Florrum with him. If Hondo had to talk with people waving laser swords around, he preferred to do it from a distance of at least a few thousand kilometers.

"Two of your lieutenants have already sworn allegiance to me," the hologram of Maul said.

Hondo considered that. He could see that Jiro, Goru, Parsel, and the other pirates were giving the two warriors a healthy respect, which was only wise. But the Weequays didn't look like they were eager to get away from the two

Zabraks, which is what Hondo would have been trying to do.

But wait, Hondo mused. *Didn't Jiro's ship intercept the freighter before summoning the others?*

Aha, Hondo thought. That wasn't fear he was seeing on his men's faces. It was *greed.* The two warriors had promised them something—and pirates didn't put much stock in empty talk. They preferred cold hard credits or goods that were within reach, or would be very soon.

Put all the evidence together, and it told Hondo that the freighter's hold had to be full of good things—and if he were patient, he could get his hands on those good things.

Pilf Mukmuk, Hondo's red-skinned Kowakian monkey-lizard, hopped on his master's shoulder. Hondo glanced at the other pirates in his office. They were staring at the tattooed warriors in fascination and waiting to see what their boss would say.

"Traitors!" Hondo said to Maul. "Scum! I'm so proud . . . but so betrayed!"

The warrior with the mechanical legs was growing impatient. Those legs made him look like some terrifying flightless avian, Hondo thought.

Jiro and Goru walked Sabo over to the cyborg warrior.

"There is a penalty for resistance," Maul said in his unhurried, cultured voice.

He then ignited his saber and slammed it through Sabo's chest.

Hondo went cold. Up there in space, his pirates no longer looked like they were mentally counting credits. Now they looked scared. Things had changed, Hondo thought. The horned warrior wasn't negotiating—he was making demands.

Which was too bad for him—because *no one* told Hondo Ohnaka what to do.

Hondo leaned closer to the holorecorder transmitting his image into space.

"Let me warn you, you're not the first laser-sword-wielding maniacs I've had to deal with," he said. "And Hondo Ohnaka survives every time!"

Hondo could almost feel those terrible eyes burning into him.

"We shall see," Maul said darkly.



CHAPTER FIVE

The Jedi shuttle dropped out of hyperspace at a cautious distance from Florrum. Seated at the controls, Adi Gallia peered at her scope and saw a freighter accompanied by three saucer-shaped attack ships.

The scope identified the freighter: an *Aurore*, designation ALC-9.

"We have a match on the cargo ship," Adi said.

Obi-Wan nodded, pleased by the news. He and Adi had headed for Florrum along the galaxy's better-traveled routes, following the great Perlemian Trade Route to the Shaltin

Tunnels at Lianna, then leaving the tunnels for the gundark trade routes near Brachi. They'd been hoping the Sith brothers would choose slower, less-used routes to Florrum in order to maximize their chances of going undetected, and so allow the two Jedi to catch up. Which they now had.

But the news wasn't all good. A glance at the scopes told Obi-Wan as much.

"It seems Maul and Savage have picked up a pirate escort," he said.

"Maybe to unload the stolen cargo," Adi said.

"I'm not sure Hondo would have an alliance with Maul and his brother," Obi-Wan said cautiously.

Adi glanced at the other Jedi, curious. Obi-Wan's skills as a negotiator had taken him from one side of the galaxy to the other, and he'd met a lot of strange people—including the kinds of beings Jedi Knights didn't normally spend time with. Such company didn't seem to embarrass Obi-Wan, though. He actually appeared to enjoy knowing his way around the seamier side of galactic society.

"So you know this Hondo personally?" Adi asked doubtfully.

The question seemed to amuse Obi-Wan. But Adi thought he also looked a little weary.

"Unfortunately, yes," he said.

Hondo was wondering what he was going to do when one of his lieutenants poked his head back into his office.

"Oi, Hondo—there's a Jedi contacting you," he said. "Says his name is Kenobi."

"Kenobi?" Hondo asked. "Ha! My, aren't we popular today. Put him through."

A moment later, Obi-Wan's image shimmered into being on Hondo's desk.

"Greetings, Hondo," Obi-Wan said politely.

The Jedi was always polite, Hondo thought. Too bad for Obi-Wan that Hondo wasn't in the mood for a nice chat.

"What kind of menace have you brought to my planet now?" demanded Hondo. "First you lose this system and Grievous comes in and destroys my entire stronghold, leaving me here to just rummage through the leftovers of my once-great empire. And now these two horned men show up. Who are these horny-headed maniacs? They don't seem like normal Jedi—"

Obi-Wan had waited patiently during this rant, but now he interrupted Hondo.

"Not Jedi, Hondo—Sith," Obi-Wan said. "We tracked them here."

"They just threatened to attack me with a group of my men," Hondo said. He looked wounded. "My own men!"

"Yes, we are looking at them right now," Obi-Wan said. "A cargo vessel and three of your starships. They are heading toward you, Hondo."

"Da-da-da," Hondo said impatiently. "More to the point, are you going to help me when you get here? Is it going to cost me anything?"

That was very like Hondo, Obi-Wan thought—two of the most dangerous beings in the galaxy were on their way to confront him and quite possibly kill him, and he was worried about credits.

"There's nothing we can do about your men, but we can certainly do something about the Sith," Obi-Wan said.

"Good!" said Hondo. "I'll deal with my men. You deal with those tattooed crazies."



The pirate ships streaked down through Florrum's atmosphere in formation, the cargo ship sitting in the center, protected by the other crafts' weapons, and fighters flying escort. The fighters fired volleys of missiles at Hondo's outpost below, dodging rockets sent up in retaliation. Explosions

blossomed on the ground, sending broken equipment and the bodies of pirates into the air.

"Well, that settles it," muttered Hondo. "Those traitors are no longer my men."

The pirate fleet landed outside Hondo's base and pirates loyal to Hondo charged to meet them, defiantly yelling pirate oaths that were impressively creative and thoroughly vile.

"I want their tongues!" Hondo roared, his blood up.

The pirate craft lowered their gangplanks. Pirates raced down the ramps, firing their blasters at their former comrades. Pirates on both sides screamed in agony from glancing hits or fell, dropped in their tracks by laser fire. At the top of the cargo ship's ramp stood Maul and Savage, watching the battle unfold around them.

The two Sith realized there was another ship coming in for a landing—a Jedi shuttlecraft. It crested the canyon wall and touched down neatly on the ridge.

"The Jedi, brother!" Savage yelled. "They've found us!"

"No," Maul said, teeth bared in anger. "It's too soon—my plan isn't finished yet. Too soon."

The Zabraks raced for the ridge, the two bands of battling pirates momentarily forgotten. They arrived as the shuttle's landing ramp descended—but there was no chance to take the two Jedi by surprise. Obi-Wan and Adi had already felt the

disturbance in the Force, a wave of anger and malice rolling ahead of Maul and Savage as if a stone had been hurled into a still pool.

Adi and Obi-Wan whirled to face the Sith, lightsabers blazing blue.

"Throwing in with pirates now?" asked Obi-Wan as he assumed a defensive stance. "Oh, how the mighty Sith have fallen."

Maul brought his saber crashing down on Obi-Wan's, trying to turn his fury into a battering ram to demolish the Jedi's defenses. Obi-Wan parried, turning the crimson blade aside, and the two traded rapid blows, their sabers howling, whining bars of light. Savage crossed sabers with Adi, whose Tholothian tendrils whipped first this way and that as she parried and counterattacked.

Obi-Wan and Adi fell back into a defensive stance, moving with the practiced ease of warriors used to operating as a team and becoming a unit whose strengths were greater together than they could be separately. Against them, the Sith's attacks were raw and vicious—animal rage amplified and focused by the dark side of the Force.

The combatants descended down the ridge and continued their battle in the canyon below. Hondo's right flank had crumbled and the pirate chief and his loyalists were retreating

toward the main doors of their lair. Obi-Wan pushed Maul back, his mechanical legs whining, and the two leapt to the top of a pirate shuttle, continuing their duel.

"I have plans, Kenobi—and you will not stand in my way this time," Maul said.

He swung his saber viciously. Obi-Wan caught it on his blade and the two continued to trade blows, grunting with effort.

Nearby, Savage and Adi faced each other across the X of their crossed sabers. Teeth gritted, Savage rained blows down on the slim Jedi, roaring as he tried to crash through her defenses. Little by little Adi fell back, all her skill no match for his enormous strength.

Drawing on the Force, Savage hurled Adi into the side of a wrecked shuttle, leaving her momentarily stunned. Before she could recover, he lowered his head and charged, ramming his horns deeply into her body and snapping her head back. Adi gasped and her hands shook.

Obi-Wan heard her cry of surprise and felt her anguish rip through the Force. He shoved Maul away, moving to confront Savage, knocking him off balance as Adi fell to the ground, motionless. Maul sprang after Obi-Wan, aiming a killing blow at him from behind in hopes of catching his Jedi enemy in a moment of distraction. Obi-Wan sensed it coming and

whirled with blinding speed, parrying Maul's attack. Then he jumped aside, knowing it would be a fatal mistake to be caught between two Sith.

"Kenobi, this way!" someone yelled.

Obi-Wan realized it was Hondo.

He drew on the Force, shoving Maul and Savage aside. Adi's lightsaber leapt into his hand as he ran for the outpost, then retreated with Hondo and his men into the safety of their lair.



CHAPTER SIX

Inside the Florrum outpost, a weary Obi-Wan found Hondo and his loyal pirates waiting at a T-shaped intersection amid heaps of booty—crates and piles, a large statue, and other ill-gotten gains.

"Take this cannon down the hall," barked Hondo. "We will ambush those traitors there."

A gaggle of pirates hoisted a heavy antipersonnel cannon onto their shoulders and carried it down the corridor.

"Where are the rest of your men?" Obi-Wan asked, alarmed to see how few stood with the pirate chieftain.

"They're setting up an ambush," Hondo said, nodding in the direction his men had gone. "We can use your help. Where is the other Jedi?"

Obi-Wan looked away, momentarily overcome with grief. Adi Gallia had been friends with Qui-Gon Jinn, and it was her investigations that had led to their mission to Naboo to break the Trade Federation blockade. Adi had instructed Obi-Wan when he was an apprentice alongside her own Padawan, Siri Tachi, then been a friend to Anakin Skywalker when so many in the Jedi Order doubted him. And she had helped save Obi-Wan's life at Geonosis, Saleucami, and Lola Sayu. It seemed impossible that she could have passed into the Force, never to fight or teach again.

He managed to get his emotions under control and look back at Hondo.

"She's dead," Obi-Wan said.

Hondo looked shocked.

"They are too powerful for even you?" he asked. "Whoa. Hey. I am speechless."

They heard voices approaching, an excited welter of pirate babble. The voices echoed in the confines of the corridor, making the speakers sound closer than Obi-Wan hoped they actually were.

"I think they went this way—over here," one of the pirates serving Maul called out.

Obi-Wan ignited his saber. Hondo's pirates readied their blasters.

"If I can separate Maul and Savage from your men, can you handle them?" Obi-Wan asked Hondo.

"If you can take care of the horned devils, I assure you I can handle my men," Hondo replied.

Obi-Wan nodded, looking both ways down the corridor that formed the top of the T.

"I shall draw the brothers away," he said. "Once that's done, blast the passageway closed."

Hondo grinned.

"Leave you alone with the two crazies?" he asked. "OK. Good plan!"

They were just in time—Maul raced around the corner, with Savage right behind him, followed by the gang of renegade pirates. Obi-Wan fled down the passage, making sure he'd been spotted. Hondo gave the order to retreat in the opposite direction as the renegade pirates tried to catch up with the two Zabraks.

Maul spotted Hondo and his pirates, and bared his teeth.

"Do not let them escape!" Maul warned his men.

The pirates struggled to keep up with the speedy Sith. Hondo retreated down the corridor, trying to will the Zabraks to hurry, urging their Force or whatever they called it to give

them extra speed. He didn't want the Sith to sense the surprise he had planned.

The two Sith reached the intersection and raced after Obi-Wan, while the rebel pirates ran in the other direction, eager to catch Hondo and his loyalists.

Perfect, Hondo thought.

He yelled for his men to fire. Laser blasts ripped through the rock, collapsing the corridor's ceiling and leaving the passage filled with stones and debris. The renegades were now separated from their Sith Masters. Hondo nodded to his own men, who turned the heavy laser cannons so that they faced their former comrades. The renegade pirates stared down the wide barrels of the heavy guns in dismay. They were badly outgunned, and knew it. They stood there for a moment, their faces glum, and then dropped their weapons.

"Are you still willing to fight me?" Hondo demanded. "The horned men aren't interested in helping you—they're only interested in Kenobi."

Jiro pushed his way through the crowd, arms open pleadingly.

"They promised us wealth and power, boss," he said. "Please forgive us! Please don't kill us! We beg of you!"

Hondo raised an eyebrow.

"Kill you?" he asked. "I wouldn't kill you."

Hondo turned to speak to both sets of pirates—those who had betrayed him as well as those who had remained loyal.

"Everyone, the horned men's ship is filled with valuable goods," he said.

A couple of the captured pirates nodded enthusiastically, having seen this wealth for themselves. Hondo's pirates exchanged interested looks.

"As your restored leader," Hondo said, "I say we celebrate our reunification!"

The pirates who had followed Jiro began to grin, thinking that a celebration sounded much better than their own executions. Meanwhile, the pirates who had been shooting at them a moment before were thinking about how rich two tattooed Sith warriors probably were. The two sets of pirates began to grin at each other, hostilities pushed out of their heads by the idea of easy credits and a good, raucous pirate party.

"To the landing pad!" Hondo yelled. The men let out a thunderous cheer and followed him, hollering and whooping, and Hondo was so happy to be surrounded once again by cheerful pirate noise that he found himself laughing as they ran to intercept the Sith.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Maul and Savage walked down the long corridor that led to the landing pad, sabers glowing red. Obi-Wan stood halfway down the passageway, waiting for them.

Obi-Wan had been only a Padawan when he fought Maul on Naboo, more than a decade ago. He'd still been learning to sense the will of the Force, and to keep from letting his emotions distract and overwhelm him. Now Obi-Wan was an experienced duelist, and had long ago found the calm center Qui-Gon had tried to teach him to search for.

Maul had been a well-trained, disciplined warrior on

Naboo—but his real advantage had been the raw power and feral intensity with which he fought. Obi-Wan didn't know where the Sith had spent the long years since he'd tumbled down the shaft of the Theed generator core, and he couldn't imagine what Maul had been doing. But whatever it was, Maul was stronger with the Force than he'd been—stronger, but also colder and more determined. It was the other Zabrak—Mother Talzin's creature Savage—who fought with animal rage.

Obi-Wan knew the Sith would expect him to take up a defensive stance in an effort to keep them at bay. But he also knew that tactic would give him no hope to prevail—he would be worn down until his guard slipped and then he would die, like Adi had.

Surprise was his best bet for survival—and perhaps his only chance.

"Surrender," Maul said quietly. "We are two, and you are no match for us both."

Obi-Wan ignited both Adi's lightsaber and his own.

"You are mistaken," he said—and then he hurled himself at the two Sith, both sabers flashing in his hands.

The two Sith fell back, startled to find Obi-Wan taking the offensive and surprised by the ferocity of his attack. Sabers hissed, their blades striking sparks from the walls, leaving

half-melted scrapes and bubbling burns in their wake.

The two Sith maneuvered to pin Obi-Wan against the wall—but there was so little room in the corridor that they got in each other's way. Savage charged in to strike, leaving his left arm exposed for a split second. It was all the time Obi-Wan needed. He lunged and sliced the Zabrak's yellow-and-black arm off at the shoulder.

Savage howled in agony, retreating toward Maul as his brother shoved Obi-Wan backward with a blast of Force power. Maul stared at Obi-Wan, eyes blazing, the hatred boiling inside him. But then he regained control of his emotions, and shut off the surge of animal rage. He had bigger plans now than merely revenge, and settling the score with Obi-Wan Kenobi could wait.

"Come, my apprentice," Maul said to Savage. "This plan has failed, but we will have another opportunity."

He and his wounded brother raced for the landing pad. Behind them, in the gloom, an exhausted Obi-Wan gathered his energy to chase after them.



The pirates were waiting when Maul and Savage emerged into the light of day. The two Sith came to a stop, gazing at the motley band of brigands between them and their cargo ship.

"Jiro, ready the men," Maul ordered. "We're leaving."

But it was Hondo Ohnaka who stepped forward.

"My men aren't going anywhere with you," he sneered. "Look at them, men! How powerful can they be? They are running away from Kenobi!"

The pirates grinned, cackled, and pointed.

"Filth," Maul spat. "You will pay for your insolence."

"Insolence?" Hondo laughed, as Obi-Wan arrived to stand beside him. "We're pirates—we don't even know what that means!"

He turned to his men.

"Open fire!" Hondo yelled. "If we kill these two, their riches will be ours!"

Maul and Savage found themselves surrounded by laser blasts flying in from all angles. The pirates were firing for all they were worth, eager to brag about the day they'd taken down two Sith. Maul and Savage spun their lightsabers in continuous arcs, deflecting bolts in all directions. But there were too many pirates, too many blasters. They couldn't possibly block them all. A bolt got through Maul's defenses, crumpling one of his mechanical legs.

Maul growled, then reached desperately out in the Force, turning his fury into a command. The Jedi shuttle tumbled off the ridge with a groan, crashing down on the landing pad and

scattering the pirates. The two brothers raced up the ramp of their ship, which lifted off moments later. As it shrank into the sky, a pirate took aim with a rocket launcher, sending a line of fire streaking after the fleeing ship. The rocket slammed into one of the cargo ship's engines, sending the craft tumbling through the air.

Obi-Wan and Hondo watched as the cargo ship plummeted to the ground, far in the distance. Hondo gestured to several Starhawk speeder bikes parked nearby.

"Well, Kenobi," Hondo said. "Let's get out there and see what riches have fallen from the sky for you and I. Shall we?"

"Very well," said Obi-Wan, peering in the direction of the crash site.



The impact had left a deep crater and scattered twisted metal and ship components across the surface of Florrum. Hondo's pirates were poking through the wreckage, calling dibs on whatever intact goods they could find. There wasn't much.

"There's no sign of those two, boss," said Jiro.

Hondo looked over the wreckage, simultaneously annoyed by the absence of riches and pleased to not have to deal with two dangerous Sith again.

"Well, if the condition of these goods is any indication, your friends have been vaporized," Hondo said.

That was good news, the pirate chief thought—the fewer laser swords being waved around near him, the better. But Obi-Wan looked far from convinced.

"I wouldn't be so sure," he said. "I cut one of them in half once, and he survived."

"Well, isn't that interesting," Hondo said, as Obi-Wan raised his chin and stared up into the sky.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Supreme Chancellor Palpatine sat in his office with Obi-Wan Kenobi, Mace Windu, and Yoda, gazing out at the endless cityscape of Coruscant, capital world of the Republic. He was wondering when Obi-Wan would stop badgering him about two bandits with laser swords who might or might not have survived a crash on a horrible dustball of a planet about as far from the towers and lights of Coruscant as you could get.

Palpatine decided that Obi-Wan wouldn't be finished anytime soon, and that he'd heard enough.

"I think we have closure on this matter, Master Kenobi,"

he said in the polite but firm tone he used when he wished to end one of the Senate's endless yammering debates.

To his annoyance, Kenobi refused to take the hint.

"I disagree, Chancellor," the Jedi said. "Everything we've learned about this is that the Sith are persistent. They will not die."

"I understand your reservations, Master Kenobi," Palpatine said, more firmly now. "But I am afraid we can no longer allow this personal matter of yours to be a Republic concern. It does not appear this Darth Maul is a direct threat to the Republic. We need to redirect your efforts to the cause at hand—stopping Count Dooku and thus ending the Clone Wars."

"Maul was trying to build an army of pirates," Kenobi insisted.

"So let him," Palpatine said dismissively. "Let him play with the rabble. It is of no relevance to the Senate compared to the Separatist threat. Good day, gentlemen."

The three Jedi turned to go, but Palpatine could still hear Kenobi talking. Now he was trying to convince Yoda.

"Something is stirring in the underworld," Kenobi said urgently to the green-skinned Grandmaster of the Jedi Order. "The crime families have had too much free rein since the Jedi have been distracted by the Clone Wars. I fear it is a fertile place for Maul to flourish, if he has indeed survived."

"Right you may be, Obi-Wan—but heed the words of

the Chancellor we must," Yoda replied, inching along with his walking stick. "A personal matter this is for you. Clouded your judgment may be. In time, if he lives, reveal himself again Maul will. And then swiftly we shall act."

Behind them, Palpatine sat alone at his desk. He steepled his fingers together and allowed himself a private, satisfied smile.


PART TWO:
EMINENCE

CHAPTER NINE



A white-hulled starship glided through the void, its sharply angled wings gleaming in the unfiltered glare of sunlight in deep space. Below the sleek craft hung the planet Florrum, lair of the pirate Hondo Ohnaka and his gang.

But no pirate craft emerged from the planet's atmosphere to engage this ship. This wasn't a slow, fat-bellied merchant galleon or a luxurious but poorly armed civilian craft. This starship was the *Gauntlet*, a *Kom'rk* transport—nearly seventy meters long, bristling with blaster cannons, and crewed by battle-tested Mandalorian warriors. If Hondo's pirates saw the

Gauntlet on their scopes, they decided it was wiser to let her go about her business.

That was a good decision.

The *Gauntlet*'s sensors locked onto another craft—an escape pod drifting in a low orbit around Florrum. The shadow of the Mandalorian transport fell over the little pod as its crew brought the smaller craft in for docking, aligning their airlocks. The hatches connecting transport and pod opened with a hiss of equalizing atmosphere.

It was freezing inside the cramped pod. A group of armored Mandalorian warriors tramped inside. Each was a walking arsenal, armed with blasters, rockets, flamethrowers, grenades, and knives—not to mention a reputation for being ready to use them. Their gargoyle helmets had T-shaped visors and bore the insignia of the Death Watch.

Behind them came two other figures, also in Mandalorian armor. The first was a large man with a confident, impatient stride. His helmet had two cannons over each ear, tipped up so they looked like horns. Beside him was an armored woman. She was smaller and slimmer than the other warriors. Her helmet's faceplate was white, and its lines were softer and less angular. But her efficient walk and watchful gaze left little doubt that she was as deadly as any of them—and perhaps more so.

Two Zabraks were lying in the dark pod, their tattooed

bodies covered with frost. The Mandalorian leader grabbed one of the Zabraks by the face, inspecting his red and black tattoos and the crown of spikes emerging from his skull. The warrior stirred fitfully, barely conscious. The leader's gaze jumped to the other Zabrak. He was also barely alive, his yellow tattoos dulled by a coating of rime. Then his gaze turned to the lightsabers on their belts.

"You're not a Jedi, are you?" muttered Pre Vizsla. "What are you?"

"Should we rub 'em out?" asked the woman, whose name was Bo-Katan. Vizsla could tell from her voice that she thought that was an excellent idea. But then she usually did.

"No," Vizsla said. "I want to hear their story. If they're an enemy of the Jedi, then they're a friend of mine."

He turned to his warriors and pointed at the frozen Zabraks.

"Load 'em up!" Vizsla ordered.



In his quarters aboard the *Gauntlet*, Pre Vizsla sank into a chair and removed his helmet, revealing a bald head stitched by an ugly-looking scar. He held the lightsabers they'd taken from the two Zabraks, staring at the deadly weapons as he turned them over and over in his hands. Even through his

gloves, he could feel the chill of the frozen escape pod still clinging to the metal hilts.

Then he put the weapons down and reached back over his shoulder, extracting a black cylinder from a pocket in his jumpsuit. Vizsla pressed a button and a flat, meter-long blade materialized out of the end of the device. The energy blade was black—rather than producing light, it seemed to suck it in. The black blade was simultaneously fascinating to look at and hurt the eyes. Vizsla held the weapon in front of him and swung it lazily. The blade made a sound like a whistle, or perhaps a scream. Its weight felt comforting in his hand.

The weapon was called the darksaber, and Vizsla's ancestors had stolen it from the Jedi Temple on Coruscant long ago. Vizsla knew nothing about the darksaber's origins, or its history before it fell into Mandalorian hands. Nor did he care—stuff like that was for historians to chatter about. Vizsla only cared that the blade symbolized his right to lead the Death Watch—and that many Jedi had died upon its blade over the centuries. He hoped many more Jedi would meet the same fate in the future.

The Jedi, Vizsla thought, baring his teeth and slashing viciously at the enemies he saw in his imagination. The Mandalorian clans had invaded the Republic thousands of years ago, only to have the Jedi defeat their clans' chieftain,

known in every generation as the Mandalore. In their lust for revenge, the Mandalorians had fallen under the sway of the Sith, who were just Jedi with different-colored lightsaber blades. That had led to the Mandalorians' defeat and ruin. The clans had been scattered, the old warrior codes neglected, the title of Mandalore held by brigands and fools.

And then, seven centuries ago, the Jedi had led Republic warships to Mandalore, bombarding the planet until huge areas of its surface were reduced to lifeless expanses of fine white sand. Then the Republic had put traitors in power—weaklings who had destroyed Mandalore's weapons and rejected its warrior codes.

The Death Watch had worked secretly for centuries to overthrow the peace-loving New Mandalorians and restore the clans' honor, a campaign that had culminated with the Great Clan Wars more than a decade ago. That vicious conflict had turned warlord against warlord, splitting clans and even families. The battles of the Great Clan Wars had left terrible new scars on Mandalore's surface, and ended not with the Death Watch's victory, but with the New Mandalorians stronger than ever. A few unrepentant warlords had accepted exile to Concordia, Mandalore's moon. But most had supported the pacifists, and chosen a new Mandalore from among their ranks—Duchess Satine Kryze.

Vizsla snarled at the thought, then raised the darksaber and carved a figure 8 in the air in front of him.

Let me be the one to undo the injustice that has been done, he thought.

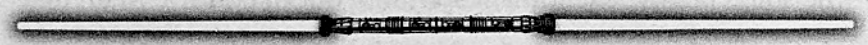
Clan Vizsla had been given charge of Concordia and its exiles, and Pre Vizsla himself had become the moon's governor—while secretly plotting against the Duchess, and working to restore the Death Watch. But the hated Jedi had interfered and ruined those plans. First Obi-Wan Kenobi had discovered the Death Watch's weapons factories and rescued Satine. Then Count Dooku, the Jedi turncoat who led the Separatists, had betrayed the Death Watch. Even that hadn't been enough of an insult—Dooku had branded Vizsla with his saber, leaving the scar that snaked across the right side of his face. On Carlac, Ahsoka Tano—brought there by the turncoat Lux Bonteri—had taken the lives of several of Vizsla's warriors.

And now two more lightsaber wielders were in Mandalorian hands. Perhaps Bo-Katan had been right, Vizsla thought. Perhaps he should have left the two Zabraks to die in space.

But if the two Zabraks had lightsabers, that meant they could command the strange power that the Jedi and Sith both called the Force. And powerful enemies of the Jedi might help the Death Watch achieve its goals.

Vizsla held the darksaber before his eyes, staring into the nothingness of its blade. *Soon,* he promised himself. *Soon the Death Watch will declare itself. Soon we will have revenge.*

He deactivated the weapon. Perhaps the two Zabrak refugees would prove useful tools. If not, he would discard them—like any tool found unsuitable for the job.



Darth Maul awakened to find medical droids tending to his damaged legs. Nearby, his brother, Savage Opress, lay unconscious, being worked on by other droids.

Maul didn't recognize his surroundings, but he reached out with the Force and felt the hot pulse of lives around him. They radiated hatred and envy and malice. He could feel that they were not Force-users—in their company, the lowliest Sith apprentice would have been like a bonfire among candles—but he could also sense that they were brutal and capable despite the lack.

Interesting, Maul thought. *Where am I?*

When he'd returned to consciousness, Maul had feared for a moment that he had forgotten everything again, that once again he had escaped death but lost himself in the effort. But this time, the memories had come flooding back at once. He and his brother had dueled Obi-Wan Kenobi on Florrum, but

the accursed Jedi had struck off Savage's arm. Maul had led his brother to their freighter, only to find Hondo Ohnaka's turncoat pirates waiting in ambush. One of the pirates had made a lucky shot and damaged Maul's mechanical leg.

The two Sith had escaped in their cargo ship, but just after takeoff a rocket fired from the ground had destroyed one of the ship's engines, sending it spinning out of control. Maul had aimed the ship toward space, locked the throttle on full power, and set the autopilot to keep the ship on course. Then he'd led Savage to an escape pod, ejecting the lifeboat at the top of the doomed cargo ship's trajectory.

They'd been just high enough in the atmosphere for the escape pod's engines to push them the rest of the way to orbit, but then the pod's batteries had run down, starving the two Zabraks of oxygen and warmth. Savage had succumbed first, and eventually even Maul had felt his vision turn gray, then fade to black.

The door to the medical bay opened, admitting a scarred, hard-looking man in Mandalorian armor, followed by a woman and several warriors. The soldiers kept their attention locked on Maul and Savage, blasters ready. The woman removed her helmet. She had green eyes and red hair held in place by a gray headband. Her eyes were cold and calculating as they studied him.

Mandalorians, Maul thought. They were a tough people, still smoldering over ancient defeats and resentments. It gave them focus, made them strong. But rather than use that strength, they wasted it—most Mandalorians were mercenaries, bounty hunters, or thugs.

But still, they were warriors worthy of respect. Long ago at the Orsis Academy, a Mandalorian named Meltch Krakko had helped train Maul in the warrior arts, teaching him tracking and tactics and numerous combat techniques. Krakko was dead—Maul had broken his neck on the same day he'd killed everyone else at the academy.

The hard-looking man held up two lightsabers.

"You're not Jedi," Pre Vizsla said. "So who are you?"

Maul just growled at him.

Bo-Katan, unimpressed, aimed her blaster—but not at Maul. Instead, she leveled it at the helpless Savage.

"We are Sith," Maul said, approving of the Mandalorian woman's ruthlessness.

Now Bo-Katan's blaster was pointed at Maul.

"Do you serve Count Dooku?" Vizsla asked.

"I serve no one," Maul said.

Vizsla looked at Savage and then back at Maul. Maul could see the man's brain working behind his eyes.

"I thought there could only be two Sith," Vizsla said. "A

Master and an apprentice."

"We are brothers," Maul said. "The true Lords of the Sith."

Bo-Katan lowered her blaster. Vizsla looked skeptically at Maul's damaged legs and Savage's stump of an arm. Maul could guess what he was thinking: *For Lords of the Sith, they're sure missing a lot of parts.*

"What happened to your ship?" Vizsla asked.

"Destroyed by Jedi," Maul said.

Vizsla leaned closer.

"Do you know *which* Jedi?" he asked, and Maul could feel his curiosity flaring in the Force.

"Kenobi," Maul growled, the word like a curse.

Vizsla and Bo-Katan looked at each other.

"And what do you seek now, Sith?" Vizsla asked.

"Fortune and power," Maul said.

Vizsla grinned, teeth bared like a predator catching a scent. He turned to the medical droid.

"Repair this one's legs," he ordered. "Do what you can for the other."

The medical droid acknowledged the order.

Vizsla strode out of the medical bay, followed by Bo-Katan.

CHAPTER TEN



They sent a Death Watch warrior to bring Maul to Pre Vizsla's tent.

Walking smoothly on his new humanoid prosthetic legs, Maul stepped out of the tent that housed the medical bay and into the center of a Mandalorian camp, his yellow eyes skipping between the tents and shelters the warriors had set up. A circular fence surrounded the camp. Behind it, a pair of *Kom'rk* transports were parked, their wings raised in landing configuration. The planet was swampy and shrouded in fog, its skies a leaden gray.

"Welcome to Zanbar," the Mandalorian said, his voice harsh through his helmet's speakers.

Maul crossed the space between the medical tent and the main tent, the warrior a step behind him. He stopped before the main tent and the warrior prodded him in the back with a blaster.

"Go on," the Mandalorian said harshly. "Get moving."

It would have been the easiest thing in the galaxy to kill the man. Maul could have done it without turning around. First he'd use the Force to crush the windpipe. Then the blaster would fly out of the weakening hands and into Maul's.

But there was Savage to think of, unconscious and helpless in the medical bay. And Maul had time. He would file away the insult, and avenge it later, when he had time to do the job properly and make it an effective demonstration of the fate awaiting anyone who dared to touch a Lord of the Sith.

Maul allowed himself a brief smile at the thought. The warrior was already dead. He just didn't know it yet.

Maul entered the tent and found Vizsla sitting on a stool, with warriors standing behind him. Before the Mandalorian leader sat a pot and two cups.

"In time for tea," Vizsla said. "Come join me."

Maul sat on a stool. Vizsla poured tea into two cups and offered one to Maul.

"Made with the florets of a Cassius tree," Vizsla said. "It's good for your health."

Maul took the cup, sniffed at the steam curling above it, then drank.

Tea with a Mandalorian, he thought. *The galaxy is certainly full of surprises.*

The Sith warrior eyed the symbol on Vizsla's armor.

"Your mark?" Maul asked.

"The sign of Clan Vizsla," the other man replied. "I am Pre Vizsla. We are the Death Watch, descendents of the true warrior faith all Mandalorians once knew."

Vizsla nodded at the watching Mandalorians.

"Now my people are living in exile because we will not abandon our heritage," he said. "Our people were warriors. Strong. Feared. Now they're ruled by the New Mandalorians, who think that being a pacifist is a good thing. They've given away our honor and tradition for peace."

Agitated, Vizsla began striding around the tent, helmet in hand.

"Duchess Satine and her corrupt leadership are crushing our souls, destroying our identity," he said. "*That* is our struggle."

Vizsla slammed down his helmet, looking around at the other warriors.

Maul sipped his tea.

"If they are weak, why do you wait?" he asked.

Vizsla refused to take the bait.

"The Duchess has powerful allies," he said. "Including your Jedi friend Kenobi. He is also responsible for our exile. Perhaps fortune brought us together."

Maul looked the warriors over. They were Mandalorians, but more than common mercenaries. They had a purpose. A plan. And their enemy, this Duchess Satine, was someone Obi-Wan valued, perhaps would even defend with his life.

If so, it would be the Jedi's undoing.

Maul nodded at Vizsla.

"It is the will of the Force," he said. "We can help you reclaim Mandalore—"

"—and punish Kenobi for his trespasses," Vizsla finished.

Maul could feel the warriors' hatred of their enemies pulsing in the Force, as well as their excitement at the idea of seeing those enemies brought down and ruined. But Bo-Katan remained calm, her face skeptical.

"We allied ourselves with Sith before," she reminded her comrades. "Count Dooku. He also betrayed us. Sith are no better than Jedi. They claim to be powerful, but we put these two back together after the Jedi gutted them."

Maul stared through the steam of his tea at the Mandalorian

woman. This was not a shove in the back, witnessed by no one. This was a public challenge, and to suffer it in silence would be a fatal display of weakness. He twitched his hand, feeling the Force awaiting his command.

Bo-Katan began to gag.

"Doubt will only lead to failure," Maul said.

The Mandalorians drew their weapons with a clatter and aimed them at Maul. But Vizsla calmly ordered them to hold their fire as Bo-Katan continued to struggle for air.

"Our combined strength will be rewarded," Maul said. "Mandalore will be yours—and Kenobi, this Sith pretender Dooku, and all our enemies will fall."

He released his grip on Bo-Katan with a contemptuous flip of his fingers. She fell to the ground, gasping for breath.

"Check on your brother," Vizsla told Maul. "We'll put it to a vote."

Maul got to his feet and pushed his way out of the tent. A moment later, Bo-Katan rose as well. She grinned at Vizsla. The Sith warrior had passed the test.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Savage awoke to find a medical droid prodding at him with its needle-like metal arms. Surprised, he smashed the offending machine with his fist, toppling it. He didn't know where he was, and suddenly his mind jumped back to when he had found himself on a table, surrounded by the Nightsisters of his homeworld, Dathomir. He had felt their spells invading his body while he lay there helpless. Their sorcery had crawled through him like a worm, gnawing at his innards, changing his body and then his mind.

Savage raised his fist again, rage ripping through him and demanding release—but before he could do further damage, someone grabbed his arm in a powerful grip and he looked up to see his brother's face.

"Rest, apprentice," Maul said. "We're safe. Our crash was discovered by enemies of the Jedi, and we are in their care."

Savage shook the memories away. This was his brother—his Master. He realized his severed arm had been replaced with a mechanical one while he slept—a collection of silver rods and plates and pistons, interlaced with multi-colored wires. He stared at the machinery in wonder, opening and closing his artificial fingers.

"Are we prisoners?" Savage asked Maul.

"No—allies," Maul said. "They have much to offer, including their planet. They are strong—and unlike pirates, they possess honor."

"Another weakness," Savage rumbled.

Maul allowed himself a moment of satisfaction. His apprentice was shedding the weak emotions from his upbringing among the Nightbrothers of Dathomir, the feelings even Mother Talzin's sorcery hadn't been able to entirely burn away. That was best. Savage was stronger without such foolish limitations.

"They know nothing of our intentions," Maul said. "Those revelations will come too late."

The brothers heard approaching footsteps. Savage nodded at Maul as Vizsla entered the medical tent, followed by Bo-Katan. The Mandalorian looked at the pathetic heap that had once been a medical droid.

"I see you have your strength back," Vizsla said.

Savage rose, standing next to his brother. During her service to the Death Watch, Bo-Katan had seen many alien species and no shortage of imposing warriors, but the figure standing before her was impressive nonetheless. The yellow-and-black Zabrak was enormous. The red-and-black one—his brother, she had heard—wasn't as large, but his eyes were watchful and glittered with malice, and even on mechanical legs he had the grace of a jungle cat.

And of course there was his power with the Force, Bo-Katan reminded herself, remembering the invisible grip that had crushed her airway, leaving her powerless to defend herself.

"I never got your names," Vizsla said.

"I am Maul," the red-and-black Zabrak said. "This is Savage."

Vizsla nodded.

"Our brothers are in favor of an alliance to liberate Mandalore," he said.

Maul could feel the man's satisfaction. It mirrored his own.

"This Duchess of yours will soon discover the true burden of peace," he told the two Mandalorians.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Now that they were allies, Pre Vizsla decided Maul and Savage deserved a tour of the camp that the Death Watch had set up on Zanbar. As Vizsla showed them around, Maul noted how well the fighters were organized and their skill at arms. But organization and skill, while vital, weren't everything when it came to war.

"Your people are strong and skilled," he told Vizsla, as they strolled beneath the dreary gray skies. "But you will need an army to free Mandalore."

"There are more on Mandalore who will join us," Vizsla said dismissively.

Maul had heard such talk before, typically from leaders who'd been told they were great so often that they'd started believing it. That was foolish, and it was dangerous. So was any plan that assumed something would happen, instead of ensuring that it would happen.

"Their help would come too late," Maul said. "We can assemble an army—beginning with Black Sun."

Vizsla looked shocked.

"They're a crime syndicate—hardly a force to rally with," he said.

"They can provide us with the resources we need to sustain a war without the scrutiny of the Republic," Maul said.



The *Gauntlet* emerged from hyperspace near the glowing red sphere that was the volcanic planet Mustafar. Moments later, other *Kom'rk* transports and Mandalorian craft winked into existence around her. Maul nodded, appreciating the precision of the Mandalorians' maneuvers. Years of practice had made the Death Watch's warriors excellent at coordination, whether they were flying starships or storming an enemy

position on the surface of a planet. They would need such coordination soon.

Maul stared at Mustafar as the task force approached the planet, which now filled the *Gauntlet*'s viewports. Their destination was down there, amid the black basalt cliffs and glowing lava flows—a fortress belonging to the underworld organization known as Black Sun.

When Savage had rescued him from exile on Lotho Minor, Maul had been startled to discover that the Force was tipped out of balance and the galaxy was at war. Darth Sidious had never told Maul the full dimensions of his plot to reclaim the galaxy for the Sith, but he had known that Naboo was one of the opening gambits in his Master's plan, just as he had known that that plan ultimately called for plunging the galaxy into a terrible conflict. That conflict had apparently started without him, pitting the Republic's human clones against the Separatists' mechanical soldiers on thousands and thousands of worlds.

But Maul cared little about the so-called Clone Wars, or the machinations Sidious had employed to set them in motion. Rather than serve the schemes of another, he had his own vision, and its success depended on other players—not admirals or generals, but criminals who had always sought to avoid the eyes of the galactic authorities, and were thriving now that those authorities' eyes were focused elsewhere.

Black Sun had existed for centuries by controlling and profiting from an enormous number of galactic crimes. The crime syndicate ran pirate gangs, smuggling rings, gambling houses, and slaver bands, among other things. Through promises of reward and threats of ruin, it commanded the loyalty of billions of beings, from small-time hustlers on backwater worlds to important government ministers on the Republic's richest planets. Some obeyed Black Sun because they wanted to gain power. Others did so because they feared to lose it. Either way, Black Sun owned them.

Black Sun's power was mostly invisible—credits diverted to mysterious bank accounts and messages that arrived from anonymous senders, then self-destructed. But the syndicate had members whose affiliation was more open. It had tens of thousands of foot soldiers, and hundreds of leaders, and sometimes leaders and foot soldiers could be found together in rich safe houses and remote fortresses.

Maul had been in one of those safe houses once—years ago, Sidious had sent him to the Core World of Ralltiir, with orders to throw Black Sun into confusion by killing many of its leaders. Maul smiled at the memories—his lightsaber had been like a wheel of fire, leaving death and terror in its wake, funneling the power of the dark side into him until the power he held within himself was intoxicating.

Black Sun had survived the attack—Sidious had only wished to hamper it for a time, not to destroy it. The criminal organization had then rebuilt itself quickly, with new would-be leaders fighting for dominance and claiming the positions of those who had been slain, until the group was as strong as it had been before. Now, one of those new leaders maintained a fortress here, on Mustafar.

Mustafar, Maul thought as the *Kom'rks* spiraled down toward the black bluffs below. He had been here before, too—Black Sun was not the only group with facilities on the lava world. Darth Sidious himself had maintained a secret redoubt elsewhere on the planet, and perhaps still did. Maul had been a child there—his earliest memories were of battling droids, of being tested, of fear and loneliness before he had learned to purge himself of those weak emotions and fill the holes left behind with anger.

The *Gauntlet* landed with a bump, and Maul shoved all thoughts of Mustafar out of his head. It was almost time for the next task he needed to accomplish to make his vision into a reality. To succeed, he would need his focus on the here and now, not on the useless, discarded past.

Maul rose from his seat. He was ready.

The Death Watch soldiers chosen for the mission marched along behind Maul, Savage, Vizsla, and Bo-Katan, the four *Kom'rks* waiting behind them on a rocky outcropping surrounded by bright lava. The Mandalorians were encased in jumpsuits and armor, but gave no indication that the scorching temperatures bothered them.

"A battalion, brother," Savage said admiringly.

"They will serve us well," Maul said.

He raised his voice to address Vizsla.

"You will now follow my lead," Maul said.

Ahead of them, a narrow bridge crossed a river of lava. Beyond it, gun emplacements protected a fortress that had been carved into the side of a cliff. The entrance was swarming with warriors—the soldiers of Black Sun. Their helmets had gold faceplates in which the eyepieces glowed like jewels.

The soldiers were Falleen, Maul saw—a green-skinned, reptilian species from the planet of the same name, in the Mid Rim. The spines on their backs emerged from their leather armor, giving them a sinister look.

Through the Force, Maul could sense the unease of the Death Watch fighters behind him. They were alarmed by the number of soldiers awaiting them.

Vizsla could sense it, too—he had no talent with the Force, but he knew his troops. He turned his gargoyle helmet

to look at his men. They couldn't see his eyes behind the Mandalorian mask, but they got the message and the muttering and shifting of feet ceased as quickly as it had begun.

One of the Black Sun soldiers strode forward, with the arrogant stride of a man used to being obeyed. He was a Falleen in rich robes of purple, with a topknot and a black goatee.

"We request an audience with your leaders," Maul said, his tone formal, even polite.

The Falleen in the fancy robes looked amused.

"It'll be your funeral," he said, then grunted and led them inside.



The lieutenant, whose name was Ziton Moj, led them deep into the fortress. At the building's heart sat a throne room with a tall window running from floor to ceiling, looking out over the bright red lava flows beyond. In the center of the throne room sat a circle of five elevated thrones around a table. In the thrones sat five Falleen in long purple robes, wearing golden headgear—the leaders of this branch of Black Sun.

The five Falleen looked down at the two Sith and the Mandalorians with a mixture of curiosity and amusement. Standing in the center of the circle, Maul reached out in the

Force, like a nashtah sniffing at a potential meal. He could feel that the Black Sun leaders were cruel and corrupt, beings who thought they could fill the emptiness in their souls with credits or pleasures or power. But they had also grown careless, arrogant enough to let a band of warriors inside their stronghold without knowing their capabilities.

Maul knew—as the five Falleen did not—that what happened in the next few minutes would determine whether that carelessness and arrogance killed them.

"Why do you come here?" asked Xomit Grunseit, the Falleen seated at the head of the table.

"We seek an army," Maul said simply.

"Fools," Xomit spat. "We are not mercenaries."

Maul smiled. The Black Sun leaders apparently didn't recognize him, or connect him with the long-ago massacre on Ralltiir. But then Maul had guessed as much earlier. If they'd had any inkling of who he was or what he'd done, they would have fought him outside their fortress.

Xomit turned to Moj.

"Dispose of them," he ordered. "Keep their ships and weapons."

Maul saw Moj swallow. The Black Sun lieutenant knew the order meant a fight to the death, and while he wasn't afraid to begin such a battle, he knew it would be a bloody business.

Maul filed the observation away. Unlike the beings he served, Moj wasn't a fool. He might prove useful.

Before Moj could give an order, another of the Falleen crime lords spoke, his eyes fixed greedily on the hilt of Vizsla's darksaber.

"Give me that one's sword," he said.

Moj reached out his long green fingers to take the darksaber, but found Vizsla's blaster pointed at his face.

A guard approached Savage with his blaster drawn. The Sith grabbed his wrist and Maul heard the bones break, the weapon falling to the floor as the Falleen screamed. Savage grabbed the green head, twisting the Falleen's neck until it broke, then slammed the luckless soldier down to the floor.

Maul looked up from the soldier's body and regarded Xomit.

"This is your last opportunity to join us," he said.

"Quiet!" bellowed Xomit. "We are Black Sun!"

The five leaders rose from their thrones. Maul reached out to feel the Force's ripples and currents, considering the directions events might take. Everything pointed the same way.

"Very well, then," Maul said.

He glanced back at Savage, then lowered his head. Before anyone could react, Savage had ignited both blades of his saber and hurled the weapon, sending a spinning sheet of

scarlet plasma knifing through the gloomy hall. The lightsaber returned to Savage's hand, its circuit of the room complete, and he deactivated the blades. The soldiers of Black Sun and the Death Watch stood there, momentarily stunned. Then all heard five thumps from behind the thrones, and the five headless bodies of the Black Sun leaders collapsed where they had stood.

Maul gave Savage an approving smile. His apprentice had performed perfectly. Then he turned to Moj, eyes blazing.

"It would seem that the decision to join us is now yours," Maul said.

Moj's eyes jumped to the tangle of dead Falleen, then back to Maul and Savage.

"After careful consideration, we will join you," he said.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Within an hour, Ziton Moj had squads of foot soldiers loading crates of supplies into Black Sun's frigates and the Death Watch's transports while Maul stood by the *Gauntlet*'s landing ramp and watched. The Black Sun lieutenant had excellent organizational skills, Maul thought.

It was time to return to Zanbar and go over the next phase of the plan. But Vizsla seemed to have other ideas.

"We have our army now," the Death Watch commander said. "I have a plan to undermine Satine—"

Maul cut him off, irritated.

"The army is weak," Maul said. "We are not ready for the Duchess."

"With my plan, we won't need a bigger force," Vizsla insisted. Maul could hear the anger and impatience in his voice.

Enough of this, Maul thought. *Things will go better when this Mandalorian knows his place.*

"There is only one plan," he told Vizsla. "One vision."

"And it belongs to the Death Watch," Vizsla said.

Maul allowed himself a moment in which he imagined Pre Vizsla's helmet clattering across the black rock of Mustafar with his head inside of it, after which a well-aimed kick would send both helmet and head into the river of molten lava. But unfortunately, Maul's plan required Vizsla for a while longer—the Death Watch commander would be needed when they reached Mandalore.

"Your vision lacks clarity," Maul said, keeping his anger in check. "Without us, you have no army and no reason to replace the Duchess."

Savage had felt his Master's frustration in the Force and approached Maul and Vizsla, glaring at the Mandalorian. Maul let him draw near, near enough for Vizsla to wonder if the giant Zabrak might keep coming and snap his neck, as he'd done to the luckless Falleen inside the fortress. When he saw Vizsla's back and shoulders stiffen, Maul knew the

point had been taken, and stepped forward to stop Savage.

"The depth of this opportunity eludes you," Maul told Vizsla, grinning like a skull. "You shall watch and learn."



The camp on Zanbar was now larger and more crowded, swelled by the arrival of Black Sun's army of Falleen. Standing beside Vizsla and Bo-Katan, Maul watched the Death Watch and Black Sun soldiers as they waited in a chow line for the cooks to ladle out the midday meal. Maul knew they didn't like each other—the Mandalorians thought Black Sun soldiers were dishonorable criminals, while the Falleen thugs thought the Mandalorians were fanatics. But both sides were keeping their hostilities in check. For now, Maul knew, they refrained from violence because they were afraid of punishment. Later, when they understood the opportunity they had, they would cooperate more willingly. By then, both sides' drill sergeants would have taught them how to fight alongside each other.

Maul, Vizsla, and Bo-Katan looked up as several *Sarisa*-class gunships flew low over the camp, slowing for a landing nearby. The gunships were winged, with a station for two gunners located amidships.

"More criminals," Bo-Katan said disgustedly.

"Spice dealers connected to all the crime families of Coruscant," Vizsla said.

Maul nodded.

"The Pykes," he said. "They will be the next to join us."

Indeed, Lom Pyke was soon striding across the camp, followed by his family's guards and accompanied by wary Death Watch warriors. Pyke was the name of both family and species: The Pykes had small faces set on gigantic skulls, long arms and feet, and goggles covering their eyes. Their homeworld, Maul recalled, was Oba Diah, near Kessel and its infamous spice mines.

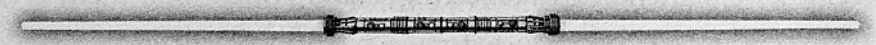
Lom Pyke got right down to business. "We know you've been forming an army," he said.

"Were you expecting us?" Maul asked.

Lom Pyke nodded, the back of his oversized head bobbing like a counterweight.

"Underworld's a small community," he said. "I have no desire to oppose you. We come to join you."

"Very good," said Vizsla. "Then ready our troops. We leave for Nal Hutta immediately."



The sluglike Hutts had ruled thousands upon thousands of worlds in the Outer Rim since the dawn of galactic history.

The Hutt clans constantly quarreled and fought, making and breaking alliances as it suited them—to a Hutt, betrayals were daily occurrences, and a good double cross was appreciated like any other form of art.

But the Hutts were always careful not to let the back-stabbing and double-dealing get too out of hand. Important Hutts from the leading clans took turns serving on the Hutt Grand Council, which had the authority to settle disputes, declare an end to feuds, and take action on behalf of the entire species.

The Grand Council met on Nal Hutta, in the heart of the galactic region known as Hutt Space. Nal Hutta was hot and sticky, notable for dreary spitting rain, the stench of rotting vegetation, and ever-present clouds of insects—all the ingredients of a Hutt paradise, in other words.

Guards in the motley livery of the Hutt clans escorted Maul, Savage, and Vizsla through a wealthy compound and into the gloomy council chamber. It was some kind of extended Hutt holiday, during which the slugs retreated to hidden Clan-worlds forbidden to outsiders. That meant only three Hutts were attending the meeting—and not all were there in the considerable flesh.

Oruba the Hutt was ghostly pale and wore a chapeau and a loose shirt made out of meters of expensive dark fabric. Gorga

the Hutt peered at the visitors through a massive monocle that left his eye looking gigantic and distorted. Jabba the Hutt, a flickering blue hologram, stared at the Sith with a canny gaze and a knowing smirk.

"Da wanga oo Stuka Crispo, pa ranna hi dopa," Jabba rumbled.

Maul knew Huttese. Jabba was acknowledging that he had heard of the Death Watch, and demanding to know what they wanted.

"There are many things the Hutts influence and possess that would be useful to us," Maul said.

For a non-Hutt to speak of ways a Hutt could be *useful* was insolent, to say the least—visitors to the Hutt Council had died for far less. But Maul didn't care. The galaxy was changing, and he was the agent of that change. The Hutts could profit from this, or be destroyed.

Besides, Maul knew that Jabba was far too shrewd to let a momentary lapse of etiquette get between him and a potential windfall.

"For the right price," Jabba said in Huttese.

"We have no credits," Maul said simply.

That was going beyond insolent to downright rude, and Oruba and Gorga looked offended.

"Well, do you have something to trade?" the pale Hutt demanded.

Maul looked up at the trio of gangsters.

"Your lives," he said. "In exchange for Hutt Space and everything in its borders."

The three Hutts chortled. The insult was so obvious, and so astonishing, that it didn't matter. They would laugh for years about the two tattooed Zabraks and the Mandalorian, and the amazing thing one of them had said before the Hutts seized them all and sent them to Nal Hutta's deepest dungeons, to test their best torturers' creativity.

"A foolish move," Jabba said as a quartet of bounty hunters emerged from the shadows, blasters drawn.

The Hutts expected the firefight to be over quickly, with the insolent visitors motionless on the floor. That was why they employed these four hunters—Embo, Sugi, Latts Razzi, and Dengar—and paid them enough credits to keep them nearby.

But the newcomers showed further insolence by refusing to fall. In an eyeblink, Maul and Savage had their lightsabers drawn and ignited, and were sending laser blasts ricocheting all around the chamber, while Vizsla had his twin blasters out of their holsters and was firing as quickly as he could. Oruba howled in anger, then ducked out of sight as he realized he and Gorga were in actual danger.

Maul had enjoyed the look of outrage on the Hutts' fat faces, but the bounty hunters hired by the slugs were actually quite capable—and they were fighting in surroundings they knew well. Next to Latts—a pink-skinned Theelin with pigtails—stood Dengar, a pudgy human whose head was wrapped in white coverings. Dengar grinned as he blasted away at them.

The Sith brothers and Vizsla began to back toward the chamber door. As they did so, the green-skinned Kyuzo hunter named Embo flung his hat—a wide-brimmed, circular disk of metal—at Maul.

Darth Maul had never imagined that someone might attack him with a hat, let alone have it actually happen. The whirling metal disk took him by surprise, striking his mechanical legs and knocking him down. Savage reached for his brother, letting out a yell as the Kyuzo fired his bowcaster, grazing the black-and-yellow Nightbrother's arm.

Vizsla ducked behind the two Sith and yanked open the doors leading out of the Grand Council chamber. Two guards on the other side stared at him in disbelief. Vizsla shot them both, then turned back and activated his flamethrower, sending a huge gout of fire washing across the room. The bounty hunters fell back before the wall of heat as the three invaders fled.

"Killya hooha!" roared the hologram of Jabba, still watching the scene through the flames.

The four hunters knew Huttese, but even if they hadn't, they probably could have figured out Jabba's command.

Kill them!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The *Gauntlet* was parked on a landing platform near the Grand Council chamber. It had seemed quite close when they had set down for their meeting with the Hutts, but now the ship struck Pre Vizsla as entirely too far away. He kept firing his blasters at the pursuing bounty hunters, who were leading a horde of Hutt servants armed with blasters, electro-jabbers, and other weapons.

Maul and Savage continued to spin their red lightsabers with astonishing skill, batting every laser bolt that came near them back into the crowd. But there were too many

pursuers—aliens and mangy-looking humans were pouring onto the platform. First there were a few thugs between them and the *Gauntlet*, then more than a few, and then they were surrounded.

You better not be late, Bo-Katan, Vizsla thought.

Fortunately, she wasn't.

A massive explosion ripped through the crowd of Hutt roughnecks, flinging bodies in all directions. The thugs hesitated, staring up into the sky in bewilderment.

Over his helmet's comlink, Vizsla heard Bo-Katan chuckling.

"I see negotiations have gone as planned," she said.

His lieutenant flew overhead, fire blasting out of her rocket jetpack, followed by the handpicked fighters she called her Nite Owls. They fired rockets into the Hutt thugs, sending them scattering.

"Secure this platform," Vizsla ordered over his comlink.

Moments later, it was the bounty hunters and Hutt soldiers who were in desperate retreat, running from the Nite Owls' missiles and the blasters of the Death Watch warriors. The Mandalorians established a perimeter, then started pushing into the Hutt compound, laying down a wall of rocket fire and blaster bolts ahead of them. The gangsters yowled as they fled headlong down the dark corridors.

Suddenly, a pale shape dropped out of the shadows near the ceiling, knocking Maul off his feet. Vizsla turned, just in time to see the butt of a rifle coming right at his eyes. It smashed him in the helmet, knocking him backward with his ears ringing.

Savage saw the attacker was a female Zabrak—Sugi, the leader of the bounty hunters who had driven them out of the council chamber. He swung his saber at her, missing, then was knocked sprawling by the Kyuzo's metal hat.

Maul aimed a blow at Sugi, who crashed to the floor. He slashed at her with his saber, expecting to cut her in two, but she dodged and the red blade merely left a rip in the ground. He continued hacking away at the bounty hunter, growling in anger as she dodged each slash. Then a white-furred anooba leapt on Maul, clawed feet a blur, and Maul's saber tumbled out of his grasp.

Vizsla got to his feet, shaking his head in an effort to clear his senses, and found Savage struggling with the green-skinned bounty hunter while Maul tried to tear the anooba off himself. It was too cramped for blasters to be of much use, and so Vizsla reached behind his shoulder for the darksaber. He activated it and the black blade screamed and wailed as he cut down the Hutt thugs trying to join the fight.

Maul hurled the anooba away and reached out with

the Force. Sugi's hands leapt to her throat as he began to strangle her.

Suddenly, the corridor was filled with blinding light, and everybody in the fight reeled, momentarily blinded and stunned. It was Latts Razzi, the female Theelin. Trying to clear his vision, Maul realized she'd thrown flash grenades into the fight.

"Come on—let's get out of here!" Latts yelled to her fellow bounty hunters.

Sugi and Embo rushed after Latts, the anooba bounding along beside them. Savage and Vizsla started to give chase, but Maul raised his hand. The bounty hunters didn't matter. With any luck, their real targets would still be in the Grand Council chamber.

Gorga had escaped, but Bo-Katan and the warriors had cornered the injured Oruba. The pale Hutt stared at Vizsla and the Sith in terror.

"Where are the others?" Maul demanded.

Oruba screamed for help in Huttese. Maul waved his hand in contempt.

"Kill him," he ordered.

Savage took a step forward and Oruba began babbling for them to wait.

"Give me a location," Maul said.

"Tatooine," Oruba gasped. "Tatooine."

"Jabba's palace," Vizsla said with satisfaction.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Maul said, nodding at his brother.

Savage stepped forward, saber raised, and brought it down.



Tatooine's twin suns—known as *Gi Dopa Gasha* in Huttese—were high in the sky when the invaders arrived.

Jabba the Hutt sat in his throne room next to Gorga, listening to the sound of fighting growing closer. The whine of blaster fire was continuous, as was the thrum of lightsabers and the screams of the wounded and dying.

As always, Jabba's throne room was filled with slaves, guards, and intergalactic lowlifes. Some were hoping for work, while others were sponging off his hospitality, emptying his larder and liquor cabinet and annoying his dancers. When the intruders first entered Jabba's palace, the Hutt's courtiers had been amused by the break in routine, expecting that the guards would kill them quickly enough. But as the sounds of fighting grew closer, the courtiers became frozen with fear. Now they were looking for a way to escape, only to find that there wasn't one.

Jabba just sat on his throne and waited, curious to see what would happen.

The sounds of guns and sabers finally stopped. A moment later, two burning-eyed Sith strode into the throne room, sabers lit, followed by a pair of Mandalorian warriors.

Jabba knew who the intruders were. He'd known even before their audacious raid on Nal Hutta, because it was his job to know such things. Pre Vizsla and Bo-Katan, two leaders of the Death Watch. Savage Opress, Count Dooku's creature—whom he suspected was really a pawn of the witch Mother Talzin. And, most intriguingly, Darth Maul—the Sith warrior supposedly slain by Obi-Wan Kenobi all those years ago on Naboo.

Interesting, Jabba thought. *Very interesting.*

One of Jabba's Gamorrean guards lumbered to put his body and ax between the intruders and his master. The piglike guard was either braver than most of his species or stupider, though the latter was hard to believe. Savage cut him down in an instant and Maul stepped forward as the members of Jabba's court tried to burrow into the throne room's walls.

Jabba laughed.

"Your reputations precede you," he said in Huttese. His latest talkdroid, a blue-and-white model with a cylindrical head, hesitantly translated the words into Basic.

"Give up, Jabba!" said Vizsla. "You're the only one left."

"Submit or suffer," Maul said.

Jabba looked at Gorga, who shrugged and nodded. They'd discussed this before, when they decided to simply wait for the raiders to follow Gorga to Tatooine, though Jabba had sent his son Rotta away to make sure the Huttlet would be safe. The two Sith and the Death Watch had thrown the galactic underworld into turmoil. If the Hutts were patient, they would be able to reassert their dominance after this storm had blown itself out, taking possession of the markets and criminal enterprises that would be up for grabs. The Hutt clans would be even more powerful than they had been. What were a few insults, compared with an opportunity like that?

"I think we've reached a majority," Jabba said in Huttese, nodding to the droid. It stepped forward tentatively, obviously nervous about its safety.

"The mighty Jabba and the Hutt families have decided to join you," the droid told Maul.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Maul and Vizsla strode through Jabba's palace, given a wide berth by the Hutt crime lord's red-skinned Nikto guards and his other servants—all of whom were now theirs to command.

"Between the Hutts, Black Sun, and the Pykes, we'll have a large reserve of muscle and supplies," Vizsla said.

"Yes," Maul said.

"Then Mandalore and Kenobi are still our priority?" Vizsla asked.

"They are vital," Maul said.

"I'm curious to hear the rest of your plan," Vizsla said.

Maul stopped, staring into the Mandalorian leader's cold blue eyes.

"The vision has expanded," he said. "You will still rule Mandalore—and under your protection, I will command a new galactic underworld."

Vizsla looked stunned for a moment, but kept his composure. After a long pause, he nodded.

"Mandalore influences a league of two thousand neutral systems," the Mandalorian said. "It gives you a great deal of options for your enterprise."

"You have learned from your previous oversights," Maul said. "With their combined forces, the Republic and Separatists will be irrelevant."

"Then we are ready?" Vizsla asked.

"Mobilize the army," Maul said. "Send an advance guard to the capital. I want a list of targets vital to Mandalore's security."

Maul could feel the eagerness swelling in Vizsla, the wild joy and lust for revenge. He gave the Death Watch commander a stern look of warning.

"Choose wisely," Maul said. "There will be no second chances."

Maul strode away. Vizsla watched him go for a moment,

then turned, joining Bo-Katan where she'd been waiting for him a short distance away.

"Stay focused," he told his lieutenant. "Mandalore will soon be ours, and Maul and his brother will be dead—alongside the Duchess."

PART THREE: SHADES OF REASON

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Not so long ago, the camp on Zanbar had been a small collection of tents housing the Death Watch soldiers. Now, starships ringed the camp—the Death Watch's *Kom'rk* transports waited next to Gozanti cruisers, spice freighters, and smuggler craft. Inside the ring, the encampment had grown into a sprawling collection of tents, training grounds, and equipment depots. Mandalorian warriors barked orders at mixed groups of the Death Watch soldiers, Black Sun soldiers, Pyke retainers, and Hutt thugs. These various groups now answered to a single name—the Shadow Collective.

In the camp's main tent, the Shadow Collective's leaders were gathered around a holographic map of the planet Mandalore. Pre Vizsla, commander of the Death Watch, stood with his lieutenant, Bo-Katan. The Falleen Ziton Moj, the Captain of the Guard for Black Sun, exchanged glances with the spice dealer Lom Pyke. Nikto enforcers employed by the Hutts had crowded into the tent, muttering to themselves in Huttese. All gave a respectful amount of space to the Zabrak warrior Savage Opress. But the man all eyes were drawn to was Savage's Master—the Sith Lord Darth Maul.

Maul stared at the planet shimmering before them: Mandalore, capital of Mandalorian Space and domain of Duchess Satine, the leader of the New Mandalorians and spokeswoman for a group of some two thousand systems determined to stay neutral in the civil war between the Republic and the Separatists. Mandalore was mottled with forests and jungles and hills, but much of the planet had been reduced to lonely drifts of white sand—the remnant of a terrible war with the Republic and a later conflict among the system's quarrelsome clans. The New Mandalorians dwelled in great domed cities that rose from the wastes—showcases for their mastery of technology and their dedication to peace.

At a command from Vizsla, the map froze. One of those

domed cities was flashing. It then expanded until it filled the map. This was Sundari, the New Mandalorian capital—and the key to the next part of Maul's plan for establishing his criminal empire.

"Where are my targets?" Maul asked, staring at the miniature city in front of him.

"We've identified them at these locations," Vizsla said, pointing at the map. "However, as I've said before, if we try to take Mandalore by force, our people will turn against us."

Maul considered the city and the circles that indicated the Shadow Collective's targets. He could feel the eyes of the room on him, waiting for him to speak.

"I will use my army to attack different targets across Sundari, and sow chaos to undermine the Duchess's rule," Maul said. "We will make them look too weak to maintain control. Then the Death Watch will bring peace where the peacemaker Satine cannot."

"We'll be saviors," Vizsla said.

"Exactly," Maul said.



The meeting broke up, and Bo-Katan started across the camp to prepare the troops, striding alongside Vizsla. She looked around to make sure none of the Sith or other Shadow

Collective leaders were nearby, then spoke urgently to her fellow Mandalorian.

"It's a risk to trust those monsters," Bo-Katan said. "How do we know they'll keep their end of the bargain?"

"We need the Sith to cause some pain and show how weak Satine really is," Vizsla said. "After this is done, no one will doubt why we're in power. Most will welcome us."

"Then what?" Bo-Katan asked doubtfully.

"Then we execute Maul and his brother," Vizsla said. "Their army will scatter, and Mandalore will be ours."



Behind them, in the tent, Maul and Savage were studying the map. Maul stared at the red circles of targets, mind working, but his apprentice was troubled. Finally, Savage could no longer keep silent.

"I believe Vizsla will betray us," he said.

Savage had wondered if Maul would be surprised, if he would argue with him. But his Master's expression barely changed.

"We have no other choice," Maul said. "We cannot rule openly without drawing the attention of the Jedi. We need Vizsla as the face of our rule for now."

Savage considered that.

"The promise of wealth will find us a new face on Mandalore," he said.

Maul looked approvingly at Savage.

"You have learned well, my apprentice," he said. "Greed never fails to motivate."



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The ancient clan poets of Mandalore had once written odes to sunlight on the planet's rolling hills, but such songs were now long forgotten. The vast white wastes reflected the sunlight and turned it harsh and blinding. The dome of the capital city of Sundari filtered and softened the light, but outside on the loading docks there was no dome to protect the eyes. It was a place of sharp shadows and eerie quiet, one that put police officers and customs officials in bad moods and made starship captains hurry through their delivery checklists, eager to be elsewhere.

A bug-eyed RA-series droid and a police officer in a green

uniform approached one of the many cargo containers that had been off-loaded recently and now waited to be approved for import, then transferred to a warehouse on the docks or shipped into Sundari itself. While the officer waited impatiently, the droid glanced at the handheld scanner, shook it, and scanned the container again.

"What's the matter?" asked the officer, mouth turned down below the eyepieces of his helmet.

"I am scanning life-forms," the droid said. "I believe this spice shipment is infested."

"Step back," the officer said, irritated with the unhappy turn his day had just taken.

Suddenly, the container door exploded outward and blaster fire erupted from inside. The droid collapsed, perforated by a laser blast. The police officer managed to return fire before Lom Pyke aimed a forearm cross at his chin, knocking him unconscious.

"Find me someone in charge," Lom Pyke barked to the other smugglers as they hurried out of the container and fanned out across the docks.



In Sundari's Peace Park, a silver RIC-series droid led a group of tourists toward the Memorial Shrine, past the

manicured shrubs and carefully placed rocks. Police officers stood on either side of the Memorial Shrine, with others stationed at their post. They stood idly, watching the lines of airspeeders humming by in Sundari's always-crowded traffic lanes and the crowds of blond and red-haired Mandalorians enjoying the day.

"The Memorial Shrine was attacked by terrorists," the tour droid explained, pointing out the blackened section of flooring while a screen mounted on its head replayed scenes of the park as it had looked before the attack. "The Duchess has left it broken as a reminder of aggressive action."

The tour droid let out an electronic groan and toppled forward, its metal head smoking.

"We will try to be more careful," Ziton Moj said as he lifted his blaster for another shot. Suddenly, cloaked figures seemed to be everywhere in the park, displaying blasters they'd kept hidden. Blasters barked and laser beams zipped through the crowd, finding targets. The two officers guarding the memorial fell and the Mandalorians in the park began to scream.

The Shadow Collective's thugs were firing at the police from all directions, not caring about civilians with the poor luck to be caught in the crossfire. Moj saw an officer with a captain's insignia trying to organize the remaining officers. He

was yelling for them to fall back. Moj sent a blaster bolt in his direction to hurry him along, then nodded at his soldiers as the police abandoned the park.

The Mandalorians were a big, sturdy people who still looked like the warriors they once had been. But Moj saw panic in their eyes and in the way they flapped their arms uselessly at the sight of outsiders with weapons. They were like a herd of frightened nerfs, and now there was a boar-wolf loose among them.

A whole pack *of boar-wolves,* Moj thought as his thugs began grabbing random civilians to rob or beat. The Shadow Collective had its orders: cause as much panic and chaos as possible. And after long days being drilled by humorless Death Watch warriors, they were itching for the opportunity to do just that.



The police were soon overwhelmed by the reports flooding in. Almost instantaneously, a tranquil day in Sundari had turned into a nightmare, with gangs of armed bandits terrorizing people at points all over the city. Police speeders raced through the traffic lanes with alarms blaring and lights flashing as commanders struggled to find a pattern to the mayhem and come up with a plan to stop it.

In the main square, below the battlements of the Sundari

Royal Palace, a crowd was gathering. Duchess Satine Kryze, ruler of the planet and leader of the New Mandalorians, strode out onto a balcony overlooking the square, followed by Prime Minister Armatan and her advisors.

The crowd was shouting. Satine raised her arms in appeal, her regal face framed by her carefully coiffed blond hair and jeweled headband, and began to speak.

"I need you all to remain calm," the Duchess said. "Holding on to our ideals is the only way we'll prevail. These attackers are just thugs brought on by the lowest element."

But reports true, exaggerated, and false continued to circulate through the crowd, and the angry shouts only grew louder.

"Listen to me," Satine pleaded. "Violence is not the way! That is what leads us closer to ruin."

Some of the Mandalorians below were pointing up, into Sundari's skies, beneath the sheltering dome. They weren't pointing at her, Satine realized—something else had attracted their attention. She craned her head to look, wondering what new horror the day had in store for her planet and her people.

Lom Pyke and his followers stopped their speeder sled in front of one of Sundari's banking centers. Lom Pyke grinned as police ran forward to intercept them.

"We're here to make a withdrawal," he announced.

"Now!" an officer yelled, pressing a button on his wrist comlink. The doors to the bank flung outward and more police rushed out, holding blasters and shields thick enough to deflect incoming laser fire. The guards aimed their guns at the Pyke band.

"Your assault on Mandalore ends here," the lead officer said. "We are ready for you."

Lom Pyke just laughed.

The officers watched as the ranks of Pyke thugs stirred, then parted. A figure with huge shoulders pushed his way to the front of the gang, facing the officers. Their eyes skittered nervously across his massive chest, taking in his yellow tattoos, his mechanical arm, his horns, and his burning eyes before settling on the double-bladed lightsaber he ignited and began to wave back and forth.

Savage Opress let out a low, rumbling growl.

The police raised their weapons.

"Take him!" yelled the lead officer, sensing that his men were nervous and fearing they might not hold their ground if the huge Zabrak attacked first.

The police opened fire, brilliant shafts of laser light zipping at the huge Sith warrior. Savage's saber spun and sang, aiming the laser bolts back at the men who had fired them. A

moment later the firing stopped. Only two officers were still standing.

Savage strode forward, a terrible smile on his face.



As Satine watched, warriors in blue and gray armor descended from the sky, flames spitting from their jetpacks, to land in formation in the square between the crowd and her royal balcony.

It was the Death Watch, Satine realized.

The Duchess found herself wondering exactly how many times the terrorists of the Death Watch had tried to kill her. She'd lost count, but at some point she'd accepted that the attempts would never stop. The misguided fanatics had tried to end her life here in Sundari, and on Concordia, and had hunted her all the way to Coruscant, and now here they were again.

She had never given up hope that she might reach them, might get them to listen. But the idea of a Mandalore who believed in peace and progress was too infuriating for them to accept. To them, it mattered not at all that the New Mandalorians had built this city and others across Mandalore, or that they had made Mandalore's cunningly built ships and speeders the envy of thousands of worlds. They didn't care that a great warlord like Satine's own father had eventually rejected

war and accepted that only peace could be Mandalore's salvation. Rather than accept a civilization built on peace, the Death Watch would burn everything Satine and her predecessors had created. They would prefer to dwell in poverty in the trackless wastes that were a reminder of where foolish warrior codes had brought Mandalore before.

Satine had accepted long ago that she might have to die for her beliefs. But she had never accepted that her people might have to do the same. She wouldn't let them die for the Republic or the Separatists, trapped amid the madness of their current war, and she certainly wouldn't sacrifice them because a few fanatics wanted to return to the madness of the Great Clan Wars.

Satine stepped forward to try to break the spell, but the Death Watch leader had spoken first.

"People of Mandalore, I'm Pre Vizsla of Clan Vizsla," he said, and Satine shook her head grimly. Satine had known Vizsla her entire life—Vizsla had served her as governor of Concordia, while secretly turning the moon into the Death Watch's armed camp. Now he was her most determined enemy.

Satine wondered when the blaster fire would come her way and end her life. But Vizsla kept talking.

"I've carried on our ancient ways, and it's time we rise and reclaim our birthright as warriors," Vizsla said. "It is time to reclaim our hearts!"

The crowd erupted in cheers.

"Join me and let us defend Mandalore against the criminals," Vizsla urged. "The Duchess can't answer their violence with her passive beliefs! We need action, not pacifism—"

Satine stepped forward, desperate.

"Do not listen to him!" she urged. "This will cause the end of Mandalore as you know it!"

"This isn't a Mandalore we want to know!" Vizsla shouted. "Our very name should send fear across the galaxy!"

Cheers rolled through the crowd once more. And then the chant began, at first from a few, then taken up until it was a continuous roar.

"VIZSLA! VIZSLA! VIZSLA!"

Vizsla stared at Satine, his blue eyes icy and triumphant, and suddenly the Duchess realized there was no need for him to kill her. He had already won.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



At the shipping docks, several disarmed police officers, dockworkers, and droids found themselves ushered by thugs into an empty cargo container. The doors shut behind them and they heard them being locked.

"What should we do?" asked a droid.

"There's nothing we can do," a police officer replied. "The Duchess's forces are being overrun across the entire planet."

Suddenly, the cough of laser blasts sounded all around the container, followed by the grunts and thuds of a ferocious

fight. All inside the container listened anxiously. Then there was silence.

The doors opened and the captives emerged tentatively into the harsh sunlight once again. The thugs were disarmed, standing motionless. They glumly regarded a group of warriors wearing Mandalorian armor, blasters in their hands.

"What's going on?" stammered the police officer.

"This port is now secured," a warrior replied, his voice filtered by his helmet.

"You have my thanks, soldier," the officer said.

"No," the man replied. "Thank Pre Vizsla."



In Peace Park, the outnumbered and outgunned Mandalorian police could do little to stop the Shadow Collective's reign of terror. But suddenly, the underworld thugs were kicking and jerking, arms pinned to their sides by lassos that had appeared out of the air, fired by the wrist rockets of the Death Watch's warriors swooping in from above.

The soldiers touched down and shut off their jetpacks. A cluster of frightened children gazed up at Bo-Katan as her Nite Owls led the Shadow Collective's operatives away.

Bo-Katan offered her hand to a child who had fallen.

"You're safe now," she said soothingly.

Lom Pyke's crew rushed away from the looted banking center, metal cases thrown over their shoulders. Police officers who'd responded to the urgent calls for help chased after them, eyes on the giant figure of Savage Opress. Mandalorians gaped at the onrushing thugs, trying to figure out which way to run.

One woman found herself in Savage's path. Barely breaking stride, the huge Zabrak flung her aside, throwing her hard enough that she sailed over the edge of the rooftop. She shrieked, barely catching a railing and saving herself from a fatal fall.

The police officers stopped chasing the Pykes long enough to pull the terrified woman to safety. Continuing their pursuit, they rounded the corner to find that the Death Watch had arrived, led by Pre Vizsla himself. The Mandalorian commander had drawn his black blade and was staring down Savage, who circled him warily, double-bladed saber at the ready.

The two came together with a crash of sabers and grunts of effort. The police winced, fearful that Vizsla would be cut down, as so many of their colleagues had been. But Vizsla parried Savage's thrusts and wild swings, waiting until he saw an opening and countering with an attack of his own. Mandalorian and Zabrak kicked and ducked and swung and dodged, sabers whining, as the Pykes and the Death Watch

looked on in fascination and Sundari's citizens peered around them from a safer distance.

Vizsla wasn't just holding his own, the police realized—he was *winning.*

Vizsla flicked his wrists deftly and spun Savage's lightsaber out of his hands, then kicked the Sith warrior to the ground and stood over him. Beaten, Savage offered no resistance. The Pykes dropped their cases of stolen credits and raised their arms as the Death Watch's warriors advanced with their blasters drawn.

"This monster will not trouble the people of Mandalore any longer," Vizsla said, making sure the gathering crowd could hear him. "Take him away, Captain."



Satine sat numbly on her throne in Sundari's royal palace, gazing at the geometric shadows cast by the afternoon sun and listening to the crowd outside chanting for Vizsla and the Death Watch.

"Duchess, Pre Vizsla and his men have entered the palace," Prime Minister Armatan said. "Should we stop them?"

Satine wondered if she looked as stricken as her advisors and royal guards did.

"How can we?" she asked. "The people are on their side now."

The doors opened, revealing a line of the Death Watch warriors. Vizsla led them into the royal chamber, eyes locked on the Duchess where she sat waiting for him. Her guards moved to intercept Vizsla, weapons raised.

"No!" Satine said sharply. "There will be no bloodshed."

"But, Duchess—" protested Armatan.

Satine looked at him sadly. He was a good man, and she feared to think how the Death Watch might repay him for his service to the New Mandalorian cause. But she would not allow Armatan to die for her—nor would anyone else in the royal chamber do so.

"I will not be provoked to violence by these terrorists," Satine said grimly, glaring at Vizsla.

Vizsla didn't bother acknowledging the insult. It was hollow and they both knew it. He strode across the chamber, listening to the chants outside, savoring the moment he had worked toward for so long.

"Listen, Duchess," Vizsla said. "Do you hear the people? They cry out for change. Your weak-minded rule of Mandalore is at an end. The resurrection of our warrior past is about to begin."



Once they had taken control of the royal chamber, the Death Watch led Savage, Ziton Moj, and Lom Pyke out onto

the balcony overlooking Sundari's main square, their wrists immobilized by glowing energy binders. Bo-Katan strode past them, heavy blaster slung over one shoulder, and gazed out over the crowd.

"Duchess Satine and the New Mandalorian leaders have fled in cowardice, while the Death Watch brought these criminals to justice," she announced.

The assembled Mandalorians booed the Shadow Collective members. Then the shouts turned to cheers as Vizsla stepped out on the balcony. Bo-Katan let the cheers gather and build, then addressed the crowd again.

"Your new Prime Minister, Pre Vizsla—leader of the Death Watch, exiled governor of Concordia, true son of Mandalore—presents you with the lords of the most-feared crime families in the galaxy," she said.

The crowd roared its approval. Vizsla, the new Mandalore, stood at the center of the shouts and applause and soaked it all in.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



They led Satine to a prison cell in her own palace, shutting her in a little room with a cot, desk, and chair, behind a door made of Mandalorian iron. She paced back and forth until her agitation became too much to bear.

"You cannot hold me here!" Satine called, voice pinched with fury. "I am the Duchess of Mandalore! Your actions will bring our civilization to ruin!"

The guards didn't respond. But someone else did.

"Is that you, Satine?" came a voice from the next cell.

Satine stopped pacing. The voice was familiar.

"Almec?" she asked in amazement.

That was exactly who it was—Almec, her former Prime Minister. He had served her faithfully for years, but the war between the Republic and the Separatists had proved his undoing. When wartime restrictions on trade interrupted the flow of goods from the galaxy to Mandalore's cities, Almec had conspired with Mandalorian criminals to strengthen the black market. He had done so, he claimed, because smuggling was the only way to keep Mandalore from going hungry. But the illicit trade had also put credits in his own pockets, while fewer and fewer shipments reached the people he claimed to be helping. Soon the only ones who profited were Almec, the smugglers, and the corrupt officials paid to look the other way.

At least that was what Sundari's courts had decided. Or perhaps Almec had been crooked from the start—Satine didn't know what to believe anymore. Almec had bought off members of her royal guard, imprisoned her, and tried to force her to sign a confession. But his plot had failed, and he had languished in jail ever since.

"Here for a visit?" Almec asked, and Satine could hear him sneering. "Or has peace betrayed you, too, Duchess?"

"Peace exists only in the minds of the faithful," Satine replied.

"And faith has been the greatest disappointment," Almec shot back.

"Only when it is broken," Satine said. "What you did for the people betrayed their trust."

"And you betrayed mine," Almec said. "Destitution leaves little room for faith. My actions allowed the people hope in your leadership. The supplies I bought on the black market kept you in power."

"Another error in judgment," Satine said. "The people made willing sacrifices for their freedom. Corruption is not the answer."

Almec began to laugh. The Duchess had not lost her capacity for lofty speeches—not even from the rather diminished throne of a cheap chair in a cell where she'd spend the rest of her life, however long the Death Watch decided that life should be.

"Then enjoy your freedom, Duchess," Almec said mockingly. "You'll have plenty of time to tell me all about it."



Darth Maul found Sundari a curious place.

The space beneath the city's dome was honeycombed with buildings made out of great blocks of permacrete and transparisteel and Mandalorian iron, crisscrossed by traffic lanes thick

with airspeeders, power sleds, and swoops. The Mandalorian machines were sleek and powerful—not made for war, but easily converted to it. The city was beautiful and green, but every centimeter of that greenery was meticulously manicured, with even the trees and shrubs in the rooftop gardens and plazas cut into geometric shapes.

Maul could feel the potential of the Mandalorians in everything they did, and he could also feel how that potential had been rigidly redirected and kept throttled. When it was unleashed once again, he thought, they would make fine servants for his new Sith.

Bo-Katan and a squad of soldiers led Maul through the palace and into the royal chamber. Pre Vizsla lounged on the throne, a backdrop of stained transparisteel softly glowing behind him.

"The transition of power will be seamless," Vizsla said. "We now have the support of the people, and Satine to bait Kenobi. With his demise, our deal will be complete."

Maul stepped forward.

"Your oversight requires correction," he told Vizsla. "We now have a base, an army, and the means to expand to other neutral systems."

Vizsla waved that away.

"It wasn't an oversight," he said. "It was intentional. I

don't have an interest in the other systems."

Vizsla leaned forward, fixing Maul with his gaze.

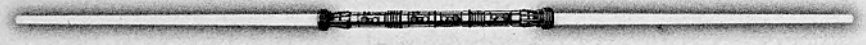
"Your vision no longer matters," he said.

Bo-Katan and another enforcer held their blasters to Maul's head. A soldier stripped the Sith warrior of his saber and locked his wrists behind his back with energy binders.

Maul said nothing. He was relieved that Vizsla had managed to wait this long, that he had kept his impatience in check. If the Death Watch leader had moved against him earlier, the plan would have been ruined.

Now, Vizsla only had one role left to play—and soon it would be time for him to play it.

"Oh, don't fret," Vizsla assured him. "I'll still honor our deal. Kenobi will be dealt with. But now you'll do as *I* say."



The crowd outside in the square had already seen a number of extraordinary things that day. But now Pre Vizsla—their new Prime Minister and Mandalore—had come to address them again. This time, his soldiers were guarding a Zabrak with red and black tattoos. The captive warrior practically radiated coiled menace and danger, and the crowd was relieved to see his arms trussed behind his back.

"The violence is over!" Vizsla assured them. "The last of

the parasites infecting Mandalore has been caught!"

Vizsla grinned as Bo-Katan and her enforcers forced Maul forward, displaying him to the mob below.

"The Duchess has abandoned her duty to protect Mandalore," Vizsla told them. "Her political dream only encourages aggression against our planet."

Bo-Katan hefted her rifle and smashed Maul in the head with it, bringing a roar of approval from the crowd. Maul wondered how long she had been waiting to do that, and if she had any idea that she had just guaranteed herself a particularly ugly death.

"We have learned from this beast the consequences of pacifist principles," Vizsla said. "It's now time to restore the traditions of Mandalore. No one will ever threaten us again!"

The Death Watch marched Maul away to choruses of cheers.

CHAPTER TWENTY



They locked Maul in a cell with his brother. Savage, agitated, paced back and forth as best he could in the tiny cell. Maul chose to meditate, letting his mind drift among the currents and eddies of the Force, testing the probabilities that lay ahead to see how they had changed. In the majority of them, he saw, his plan still worked out as he had seen in his visions.

Savage continued to pace. Maul decided to try to calm his apprentice. Savage's emotions were powerful, and it was wasteful for him to let anger and frustration bleed out in a cell instead of using them to destroy their enemies.

"Vizsla has captured the support of his people, just as we planned," Maul said. "However, he is not their anointed leader yet. There is still time for us to put in place a leader under our control."

"Then let us escape and we shall find one," Savage said, seething.

Maul glanced at the guard stationed outside the cell door.

"Patience," Maul said. "We must move cautiously. By placing us in prison, Vizsla has unwittingly put us within reach of several candidates for his successor."

That made Savage stop pacing. He looked at Maul, curious.

"What do you mean, brother?" he asked.

"Vizsla has imprisoned the Duchess here," Maul said. "Other political advisors of hers will be within these walls. They will suit our purposes well."

The guard overheard their conversation and turned.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Quiet, you two!"

Maul and Savage stared at the guard with freezing contempt, then looked at each other.

Maul smiled faintly.

"Apprentice, I wish to tour this facility," he said.

A moment later, the door to their cell exploded outward, ripped away by a tremendous surge in the Force. Stunned by

the blast, the guard stumbled forward and toppled over the railing, screaming uselessly as he fell.

Maul and Savage made their way down the cellblock, peering in at the prisoners. They stopped before a cell occupied by a striking woman with blond hair.

"You are the now-former Duchess Satine, are you not?" asked Maul.

Fear showed in the woman's eyes for a moment, but then she pushed it away and glared out at the two Zabraks.

"What do you want, you monster?" she demanded.

Definitely the Duchess, Maul thought, admiring her spirit.

"Nothing yet," Maul said. "But I will have a use for you in time. Where are the other leaders of your people?"

"You should know already," Satine said bitterly. "They've either sided with Vizsla or have been killed. There's no one left now but Almec and me—but he's as corrupt and vile as you."

"Really?" Maul grinned. "Thank you for being so cooperative."

A man with a strong chin and nose sat in the next cell. Maul unlocked the door and he and Savage entered the cramped space. Almec got to his feet, then backed up, bumping into the wall. There was nowhere to run.

"Almec?" Maul asked.

"Yes," Almec said, obviously frightened.

"I can deliver you from this prison," Maul said. "What was your position in this government?"

Now that he knew his death wasn't imminent, Almec managed to control his fear. *Good,* thought Maul. Maybe the man wouldn't be as useless as he'd first seemed.

"I am the former Prime Minister," Almec said with as much dignity as he could manage. "Satine imprisoned me on charges of corruption and conspiracy for using the black market."

Maul smiled. The man was perfect for his designs—so much better than Pre Vizsla, in fact.

Satine had been listening from her cell. Now, she could no longer stand it.

"He's a murderer!" Satine objected. "He caused the death of children!"

Savage turned in the direction of her cell, his eyes blazing orange and red.

"Quiet!" he bellowed.

A guard on the next level down heard the ruckus and spotted the two Zabraks out of their cell. He fired, the blaster bolt going wide. Savage reached down with the Force and dragged the man into the air, choking him. The guard's legs kicked desperately as he struggled for breath.

Maul stepped closer to Almec.

"What do you want from me?" the former Prime Minister asked.

"Mandalore is in need of a Prime Minister," Maul said.

"I thought you were in league with Pre Vizsla," Almec said, confused.

"We were," Maul said.

Savage tired of tormenting the guard and broke his neck with the Force. He released the man and his body plummeted out of sight as Satine looked on in horror.

"Clearly you are powerful," Almec said, trying to placate the two deadly warriors. "But how can two of you overthrow Vizsla and his supporters?"

"Vizsla is a soldier, and like all soldiers he is bound by honor," Maul said. "I will challenge him to single combat in front of his men. He cannot deny me."

Almec nodded.

"If you defeat him, according to the ancient laws of Mandalore his soldiers will be honor-bound to follow you," he said.

"Exactly," Maul said.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Vizsla was sitting with Bo-Katan and a group of warriors when the commotion began outside the royal chamber. A hologram materialized from the transmitter in the floor and a Death Watch enforcer stood before them.

"Sir, they're attacking—" he warned, then began to choke.

The hologram cut out and the doors at the far end of the royal chamber swung open. Vizsla scrambled to his feet in disbelief as Maul strode down the length of the chamber, followed by Savage and—of all people—Almec.

"I challenge you, one warrior to another," Maul said. "And only the strongest shall rule Mandalore."

"So be it," Vizsla said.

He gestured to the Death Watch fighters.

"Give him his weapon," Vizsla said.

Vizsla ignited the darksaber, which whined in his fist, the blade like a slice of deep space. It seemed to pulse with a terrible hunger. Maul stared at Vizsla over his humming scarlet blade. The Mandalorians looked on in fascination.

Watching from where he stood next to Savage, Almec smiled at the trap Vizsla had set for himself. The Death Watch commander had spent years dreaming of restoring the pitiless old warrior codes that had bound Mandalore's clans for thousands of years. Now that he had succeeded, he would have to live by them—or die.

As for himself, Almec had grown up a New Mandalorian, despising the old ways, the feuds and bloodlust and lives thrown away in barbaric contests of supposed honor. But now the throne of Mandalore belonged to the Death Watch, and Sundari's royal chamber was a dueling ground. The old ways were dead—and Almec would bury his past along with them.

"For Mandalore!" Vizsla shouted, slashing at Maul with murderous fury. The Sith warrior parried the attack and

swung his blade in a humming arc. The Mandalorian countered the blow. They circled each other warily, looking for a gap in each other's defenses, then came together with blades crossed, sparks and spatters of light marking the places the deadly plasma of darksaber and lightsaber contacted each other.

Maul shoved Vizsla back, the darksaber keening as it whistled through the air, and stared at the Death Watch commander. Vizsla was an excellent duelist—strong, graceful, and able to sense what an opponent's smallest movement indicated would happen next. But for all that, Vizsla could not sense the Force. He would never be able to see things before they happened, or command the laws of the universe to bend for him.

Savage knew it, too—Maul caught sight of his apprentice's slight smile where he stood, watching Master and Mandalorian continue their deadly dance. The two dodged and weaved as their blades buzzed and whined, meeting and parting in blurred arcs as Maul and Vizsla grunted with effort.

Suddenly, Vizsla's hand dipped for his holster. He drew his blaster and fired in one motion. The quick draw would have left most enemies lying on the polished floor with a smoking hole in their chests, and it took Maul by surprise. But the Force

saved him, lending him the speed to sense the attack, raise his saber, and intercept the bolt before it killed him. Still, the shot knocked the saber out of his hands. Vizsla rushed in for the kill, darksaber raised to cut Maul in two.

The killing stroke never came. Maul stood his ground, his hands locking onto Vizsla's wrists. The darksaber flew out of the Mandalorian's hands and skated across the polished marble as Maul flung Vizsla to the floor.

Vizsla managed to rise to his knees, but couldn't get up. Savage grinned. Bo-Katan took a step forward, reaching for her weapons, but one of the soldiers stopped her. The warrior code forbade her from interfering. She watched in frustration as Maul leapt on Vizsla with his fists flying, battering the Death Watch commander again and again.

Maul stretched out his hand and the darksaber flew into his grasp.

Vizsla, swaying slightly on his knees, stared at the black blade in Maul's hand. It was beautiful.

"Like you said, only the strongest should rule," Vizsla said.

The darksaber howled and Vizsla's headless body slumped to the floor.

Maul raised the black blade, his gaze pinning each warrior in turn.

"I claim this sword—and my rightful place as ruler of the Death Watch," he proclaimed.

One by one, the Mandalorians dropped to one knee, obeying the code and acknowledging Maul's claim. But Bo-Katan remained on her feet. So did seven other of the Death Watch's warriors. Maul turned his blazing eyes on her, making sure she could read the message there.

Submit—or pay the price.

"Never!" Bo-Katan yelled. "No outsider will ever rule Mandalore!"

"If you will not join me, you will all die," Maul warned.

The warriors who had kneeled now got up slowly, turning until they were facing Bo-Katan and the soldiers who had refused to acknowledge Maul. Both sides raised their weapons.

"You're all traitors!" Bo-Katan yelled.

"Unfortunately, history won't see it that way," Maul said. "Execute them."

But Bo-Katan's warriors fired first, forcing their former comrades to duck. Bo-Katan fired her blaster furiously at Maul and Savage. They dodged, and the eight rebellious Mandalorians fought their way across the royal chamber. Bo-Katan flicked her wrists and sent a trio of thermal detonators bouncing across the floor. Then she and her followers ignited their jetpacks and streaked across the sky.

Picking himself off the floor of the throne room after the detonators' impact, Maul stared after the fleeing Mandalorians for a moment, then turned away. They were an annoyance—no more.

The Death Watch was his to command.

He was the new Mandalore.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Almec walked out onto the royal balcony and found Sundari's main square filled with Mandalorians, gazing up at the palace with wildly mingled fear and anxiety and confusion.

"Silence, please—silence!" he called. "Hear me now!"

The crowd slowly subsided. Almec saw people looking up at him in disbelief and disdain, remembering the circumstances of his arrest and his now-interrupted prison sentence. He would address that particular point in a moment. First, he had something else to tell them.

"Duchess Satine, the so-called pacifist, who could not

protect you when your lives were at stake, has murdered Pre Vizsla, the true hero of Mandalore," Almec said.

There were gasps and cries below. Almec waited for the crowd to quiet a bit, to get over the shock of the news.

"Satine is now under arrest," he said. "And it was Pre Vizsla's last command that I be reinstated as Prime Minister."

A few cheered. But many more clearly doubted him.

"I know my past is checkered," Almec said. "But I promise you, I take full responsibility for my people, and my heart now bleeds for your pain. However, from this point on, Mandalore will be strong and we will be known as the warriors we were always meant to be."

Cheers rang out here and there, then began to spread. He stood and waited as the sound slowly built, reaching a crescendo as a unit of heavily armed warriors marched out onto the balcony and flanked their Prime Minister on either side.



Almec could still hear the cheers after he reentered the royal chamber. He found Maul seated on the Mandalorian throne, its transparisteel panels glowing behind him. Maul gazed at him for a long moment, until Almec began to shift his feet uneasily.

Finally, the Sith warrior spoke.

"You have done well, Prime Minister," Maul said.

Almec tried not to let his relief show.

"I shall waste no time in building my administration," he told Maul.

"Choose wisely," Maul said. "I will hold you personally responsible for their failures."

Almec swallowed nervously.

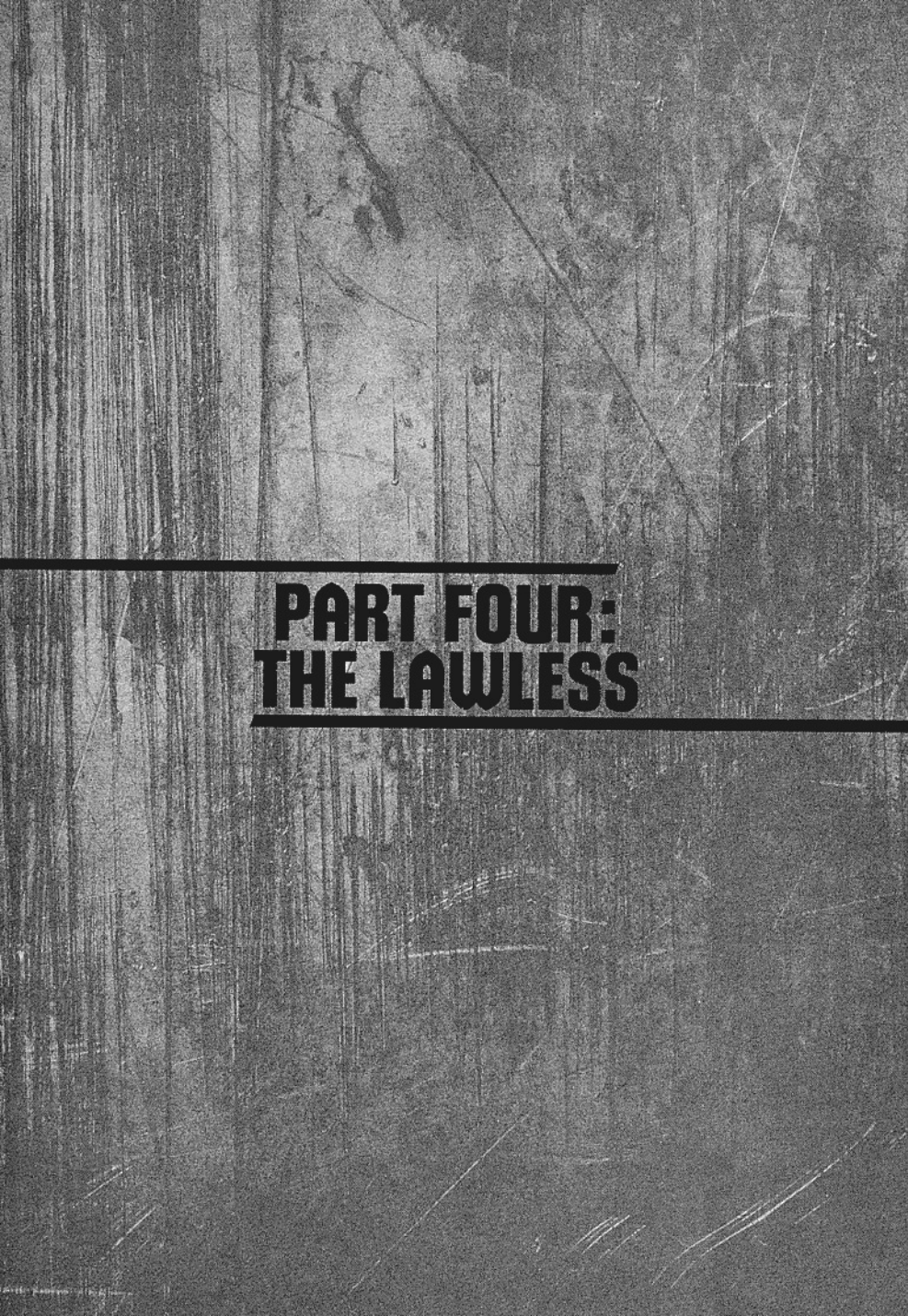
"Yes, Master," he said. "Uh, is there anything more you require?"

Maul waved one hand carelessly.

"Go—rule my people," he said.

Almec bowed and removed himself from Maul's presence as quickly as his dignity allowed. Maul sat for a while, considering all that had occurred. Mandalore was his. Now, more worlds would follow.

Darth Maul rearranged himself on the throne of Mandalore, steepled his fingers, and smiled.


PART FOUR:
THE LAWLESS



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Beneath Sundari's royal palace, now occupied by Darth Maul, Duchess Satine Kryze sat in her cell and waited for something to change.

The guards had told her of the astonishing events as they'd unfolded, eager to boast of each new defeat for the pacifist cause. In the weeks since Vizsla's death, Maul and Almec had gotten rid of anyone who might still be loyal to Satine's regime and filled Mandalore's ministries with their own followers. They had been busy, but sooner or later their attention would return to the Duchess, left to rot in her own prison.

They would kill her, of course. Satine was sure of that. The only question was whether they'd publicly disgrace her first. Almec would enjoy a show trial, seeing it as a chance to settle the score for his own arrest and sentence for corruption and conspiracy. But what of the Sith? Satine doubted that Maul was much of a believer in judicial proceedings.

Satine breathed in and out slowly, calming herself as best she could. Whatever came, she promised herself, she would meet it with as much grace and dignity as she could manage. She would do so for her people and for her planet. When Mandalore first rejected war and barbarism, more than seven centuries of peace had followed. Then the planet had turned its back on violence again after the Great Clan Wars. When the current spasm of madness had passed, Mandalore would find a way to choose peace again.

And when that happened, perhaps someone might remember the name of Duchess Satine.

The thought gave her some small comfort, where she had no other hope, and she sat down to wait.

As it turned out, she didn't have to wait for long.

At first Satine ignored the footsteps coming down the cellblock. But when they drew near to her own cell, she looked up. A Mandalorian commando was looking through the

transparisteel at her. His helmet and armor had been repainted red and black—the colors of Darth Maul.

Perhaps she'd been wrong, Satine thought grimly. Perhaps they'd decided to execute her now, to make a clean break with the past.

The door slid open.

"What do you want, traitor?" Satine spat.

The commando swayed slightly and then fell forward, helmet bouncing off the floor of the cell with a ring of metal on metal. Satine looked at the fallen Mandalorian in disbelief for a moment before it occurred to her to look behind him.

Her eyes widened in astonishment.

Standing in the cell's doorway was her nephew, Korkie Kryze. A student at Sundari's Royal Academy of Government, he was in his late teens—nearly a man, with red-gold hair and a long, aristocratic-looking nose.

"I would never betray you, Auntie Satine," Korkie said. "I'm here to rescue you."

"Korkie!" Satine rushed out and embraced him, but their reunion was almost instantly ruined—one of Maul's commandos marched down the cellblock toward them, blaster raised.

"Freeze!" the commando ordered. "Hold it there!"

Satine and Korkie raised their arms in surrender—only

to hear a blaster cough and watch the commando drop to the deck. Satine turned and saw another warrior approaching from the opposite direction, gun still drawn. The armored figure was slim and lethal-looking—a woman wearing traditional Mandalorian gear, Satine realized. Her helmet was gracefully curved, with a white faceplate. The hard T of the visor was indented and angled to suggest eyes and a beak, like those of the night birds that still hunted in Mandalore's few remaining forests.

"The Death Watch!" Satine said. "Why are you helping?"

Then she realized Korkie was grinning.

"It's OK, Auntie," the boy said. "She's on our side now."

Bo-Katan came to stand beside the boy and the Duchess, eyes searching the cellblock for enemies. For the moment, they were alone. Bo-Katan stared at the Duchess, lost for a moment in the long history that linked them. She had spent years working to ensure Satine's downfall. Now, she was risking her life to break her out of jail. The galaxy, Bo-Katan thought, was stranger than anyone could possibly imagine.

Yet here they were. And in an unpredictable galaxy, you fell back on the wisdom of those who had come before you.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," Bo-Katan said.

Satine had spent her life rejecting such simple talk, urging Mandalorians to look beyond philosophy that grew out of the

barrel of a gun. But now she nodded at Bo-Katan.

"I can agree with that," Satine said. "Come on, let's go."



The unlikely trio—a teenage cadet, a Death Watch warrior, and a pacifist former Duchess—emerged on the landing platform that served the prison. Two of Bo-Katan's Nite Owls were waiting for them, as well as three of Korkie's fellow cadets from the academy—Amis, Soniee, and Lagos. A speeder hovered on the platform, ready for passengers, with smaller speeders waiting nearby.

Looking at the four teenagers, Satine felt something grab at her heart. They should have been at the academy, preparing for graduation and jobs creating a better Mandalore. Instead they were risking their lives as part of a prison break in a war-torn city.

She pushed the thought away. Much worse things awaited Mandalore's children under the rule of Darth Maul. And besides, she remembered with a smile, these four cadets had broken her out of prison once before. Two years ago, they had been the ones who foiled Almec's plans to seize power and frame her for corruption.

Perhaps that was a good omen for their planet.

"It's all clear," Amis said. "Come on!"

Of course, thought Satine, *last time the cadets had had a Jedi helping them—without Anakin Skywalker's apprentice Ahsoka Tano, things might not have gone as well as they had.*

Speaking of the Jedi . . .

"We need to contact the Jedi Council," Satine said. "Korkie, give me your comlink."

"It won't be any good unless we get you outside the city," Korkie warned. "All other frequencies are jammed."

Satine frowned. She'd been hoping Maul and Almec might have been too busy to shut down communications, but no such luck.

"You are all taking a terrible risk by helping me," Satine said.

Korkie grinned.

"Nothing we haven't done before, right, Auntie?" he said.

Bo-Katan shook her head, gesturing for Satine to get in the lead speeder. At least they'd sent the Duchess to prison in one of her sensible outfits, instead of some ridiculous formal dress dripping with jewels.

"Let's get going," Bo-Katan said gruffly.

Korkie handed Satine his comlink and joined her in the lead speeder as his fellow cadets found places in the other speeders. As they started the engines, Satine heard a hiss of propellant and looked up to see commandos in red-and-black

armor racing toward them, fire blasting out of their jetpacks. Bo-Katan heard them coming, too, and gestured for her warriors to take off.

The speeders flew off between Sundari's skyscrapers. Bo-Katan's warriors followed, jetpacks blazing. Sundari's city-block ladders and towers were a blur as they raced past, heading for the landing platforms that extended like fingers from the perimeter of Sundari's dome. The commandos loyal to Maul settled in behind them, human missiles streaking across the city. Their jetpacks burned like torches. Satine felt her stomach protest as the speeder cut a corner at perilous speed.

Laser blasts streaked past the speeders as Maul's commandos opened fire, trying to cut them off before they could reach the landing platforms. Satine winced, trying to will the speeders to go faster. Lasers were sizzling all around them, their brilliance leaving spots on her vision.

Behind the former Duchess, Bo-Katan tried to calculate the remaining distance to the landing platform, weighing it against the speed and skill of the commandos chasing them.

She didn't like what those calculations told her.

Bo-Katan gestured urgently to her two warriors.

"Take 'em out!" she yelled. "Get the Duchess clear!"

The two warriors zoomed upward and arched their backs, rocketing backward in a neat loop to intercept the incoming

commandos, whom they tackled in midair. Locked in a deadly embrace, the four Mandalorians pinwheeled across the sky, limbs kicking.

One of Maul's commandos was still chasing them. Bo-Katan fired her grappling line, lassoing him neatly. Holding on to the line, she whipped the commando around in an arc that ended with a sickening impact against a building.

For a moment Bo-Katan wondered which former comrade of hers it had been, then pushed the thought out of her mind. This was no day to be sentimental about the fate of traitors.

They had almost reached the landing platform. Bo-Katan started to relax, but went rigid when she heard the roar of more jetpacks behind her.

Six more of Maul's commandos had joined the chase.

The speeders reached the landing platform and Bo-Katan and her warriors touched down behind them, urging Satine and the cadets to take shelter as they turned to fire at their airborne pursuers.

Satine checked her comlink.

"The transmission is still blocked," she told Korkie, voice tight with frustration.

Laser bolts sang through the air as the two teams of warriors blasted away at each other. Satine jumped to her feet, heedless of the danger. Korkie ran right behind her, firing at

Maul's commandos to give his aunt cover. Bo-Katan watched in amazement as the former Duchess ran across the platform, trying to find a place where she could get a signal.

Finally, the comlink indicated it had connected with the HoloNet transmitters in orbit above Mandalore.

"This is a message for Obi-Wan Kenobi," Satine said urgently, raising her voice to be heard above the crackle of blaster fire. "I've lost Mandalore. My people have been massacred. . . ."

A commando knocked Korkie sprawling. Satine looked up and saw more of Maul's loyalists touching down around her. The battle had been lost.

"Obi-Wan," Satine said into the comlink, "I need your help."

Maul's commandos had her surrounded. Satine raised her chin, eyes flashing with defiance, as they reached for her.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

On Coruscant, Obi-Wan Kenobi entered the Jedi Temple's war room, where Yoda and Ki-Adi-Mundi were waiting for him.

"You summoned me, Masters?" he asked politely.

The look on their faces told him he wouldn't like the news.

Ki-Adi-Mundi reached for the controls to the holo-projector, then stepped back as the message began to play. A hologram sprang into being and a three-dimensional portrait of Duchess Satine stood before him. She looked determined, as she always did. But she also looked exhausted and deeply

worried, and Obi-Wan knew something was very wrong.

"This is a message for Obi-Wan Kenobi," Satine said. *"I've lost Mandalore. My people have been massacred. And Almec is now the Prime Minister. I can't explain everything now, but Almec has the support of the crime families. Obi-Wan . . . I need your help."*

Mandalorian commandos in red-and-black armor stepped in front of Satine and a moment later the hologram cut off. Obi-Wan stared into the gloom of the war room, hoping the message might somehow resume, that the foreboding image wouldn't be the end of the communication.

"Your thoughts on this, Master Kenobi?" asked Yoda.

Obi-Wan stared down at the deactivated holoprojector.

When Obi-Wan was still a Padawan, Mandalore had been engulfed by endless battles between its clan leaders. Satine's father, the greatest warlord of Clan Kryze, had sent his daughter to Coruscant for training in statecraft and diplomacy. After he died, Satine was his clan's brightest hope. The Jedi Council had ordered Obi-Wan and his Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, to bring her back to Mandalore and keep her safe.

That had proved difficult. The three had spent months on the run, with the two Jedi protecting Satine from seemingly endless enemies. Once the danger had passed, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had stayed to monitor the situation for the Republic,

watching as the charismatic young Duchess rallied the weary warlords to the New Mandalorian cause.

To Qui-Gon's amusement, Satine and Obi-Wan had quarreled about nearly everything. They had also fallen deeply in love, despite their vows to avoid doing so—or maybe because of them. When Satine was safe again, Obi-Wan had simultaneously hoped she would ask him to stay with her and dreaded that she might do so. Emotional attachments were forbidden for Jedi, to say nothing of marrying Mandalorian noblewomen. He would have been expelled from the Jedi Order—and that was a fate he had been willing to accept.

But Satine had not asked him. Obi-Wan had continued his Jedi training, and shoved the thought of Satine down so deep in his memory that the regrets came rarely. For the most part, he was grateful for the life of service he had pursued.

For the most part, but not entirely. All of a sudden, he felt terribly guilty. She had loved him and he had abandoned her.

He met Yoda's green-eyed gaze and knew he would tell the wizened Jedi Grandmaster none of this. Yoda could be kind and sympathetic, but Obi-Wan doubted if he really understood the human heart, or accepted its weaknesses.

Don't center on your anxieties, Obi-Wan thought. *Fear, jealousy, suffering . . . these open the doors to the dark side.*

"Satine has been at odds with the Death Watch for years," Obi-Wan said, keeping his voice carefully neutral. "And according to a report from Padawan Tano, they are no longer in league with the Separatists. If there was a takeover on Mandalore, it was most likely an independent act caused by the Death Watch alone."

Yoda nodded and looked at Ki-Adi-Mundi.

"Without involvement from the Separatists, if this is an internal affair for the Mandalorians, I'm afraid we cannot help," the cone-headed Cerean Jedi said.

Obi-Wan saw that the matter was closed as far as they were concerned—thousands of worlds were engulfed by war, and the Jedi were needed on more battlefields than they could possibly visit. But it wasn't that simple—at least not to Obi-Wan.

"We cannot just hand Mandalore over to these crime families and let Satine become a martyr," Obi-Wan insisted.

The two elder Jedi looked at him patiently.

"I'm afraid her decision to keep Mandalore neutral makes this situation difficult," Ki-Adi-Mundi said diplomatically.

Ah yes, Obi-Wan thought. *Politics, the enemy of decisive action.*

Unfortunately, Ki-Adi-Mundi was right. With help from Obi-Wan and Padmé Amidala, Satine had foiled a murky plot that

would have sent Republic peacekeepers to Mandalore in force. The Republic fleet had stood down in its final hours of preparation, leaving Mandalore's neutrality unchallenged. Satine had won and the Republic had been deeply embarrassed—and because of that, no help would be forthcoming this time.

"Understand your feelings I do, Obi-Wan," Yoda said. "But to take action, support from the Senate we will need."

I very much doubt you understand my feelings, Obi-Wan thought. He shoved the thought away, locking it up with many other things that a Jedi wasn't allowed to say and wasn't supposed to feel.

"You know what the Senate will decide," Obi-Wan said. "They will not send aid to a neutral system."

"At this time, nothing more can we do," Yoda said.

There's nothing you *can do, Master Yoda,* Obi-Wan thought. *But I have an idea.*



Obi-Wan found Anakin beside his starfighter in the Jedi hangar, talking excitedly with R2-D2 and a gaggle of mechanics about the relationship between etheric rudders and acceleration compensators. Obi-Wan waited impatiently for the incomprehensible conversation to end.

It showed no signs of doing so, until Anakin saw his former Master waiting. His eyes widened when he saw Obi-Wan was wearing the armor confiscated from the bounty hunter Rako Hardeen. Anakin excused himself, leaving Artoo to beep indignantly at the mechanics about something or other.

"Not faking your own death again, are you?" Anakin asked.

Obi-Wan explained the situation quickly.

"And the Jedi Council will do nothing, of course," Anakin said disgustedly.

"It's not as simple as that," Obi-Wan said reluctantly. "The Senate—"

"The Senate will do even less," Anakin said. "But we're not the Senate or the Council, are we? Ready when you are, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan felt a surge of gratitude. Anakin was loyal, and a good friend. But that wasn't what he wanted from his former Padawan.

"I'll hear quite enough from Master Yoda without involving you," Obi-Wan said. "Let's keep the level of uproar to merely enormous, shall we?"

Anakin shook his head.

"Anakin, this is my burden to bear," Obi-Wan said. "I

appreciate your wanting to help, but I must do this alone."

Anakin gazed at Obi-Wan, saw he wouldn't change his mind, and nodded unhappily.

"I was wondering if I might borrow that old freighter of yours," Obi-Wan said.

"The *Twilight*?" Anakin asked. "Sure. Though you should know—"

"Is she spaceworthy these days?" Obi-Wan asked.

"The engines need tuning, and she's pitching more than I'd like, and there's a list of other little problems," Anakin said with a frown. "If you give me and Artoo an hour—"

"As long as she'll fly—and land," Obi-Wan said. "I'm not planning on making the Kessel Run, or trying my hand at the five Fire Rings of Fornax."

"She's all yours, then," said Anakin, amused at the idea of Obi-Wan finding himself in either one of those places. Obi-Wan's ideal space voyage would be spent meditating until a droid pilot told him they'd arrived.

Obi-Wan smiled and turned to walk across the hangar, Hardeen's helmet tucked under one arm.

"Thank you, Anakin," he called back over his shoulder. "I promise I'll return her without a scratch."

"Scratches add character," Anakin said. "Don't worry

about it, Obi-Wan. Just go rescue your girlfriend."

"I told you, Anakin, she's not my—" Obi-Wan said, then saw Anakin smiling at him.

He nodded and smiled back.

"May the Force be with you," Anakin said.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Two of Maul's commandos led Satine into the royal chamber, with Prime Minister Almec walking at the head of the procession. Darth Maul sat in the throne that had once been Satine's, his burning eyes seeming to drill into her brain. She fought down her disgust at the sight of this amoral murderer lounging in a hall where so many had worked so hard to further the cause of peace.

"Satine's accomplices have escaped, including the renegade Death Watch soldiers, but we will find them," Almec

said. "The Duchess appears to have contacted the Jedi—just as anticipated."

Satine looked at Maul in horror. The Sith Lord smiled with a terrible glee.

"Good," Maul said. "You have done well."

"What of the people?" Almec asked.

"You are the legitimate Prime Minister," Maul said. "Mandalore is a sovereign planet, and you will maintain its neutrality."

It sounded almost reasonable, particularly when said in Maul's smooth, cultured voice. But Satine knew it was a way of hiding some awful plot. If Mandalore wasn't to become part of Count Dooku's Confederacy of Independent Systems, perhaps Maul meant to hand the planet over to his criminal allies—the pirates, smugglers, and slavers who had terrorized the people of Sundari.

"And what of the Jedi?" Almec asked.

"We are prepared for Kenobi," Maul said.

Oh, Obi-Wan, Satine thought. *What have I done?*

There was nothing wrong with the *Twilight*, Obi-Wan decided, that couldn't be fixed if you gave an army of

mechanics a dozen repair droids and the parts for an entirely new ship. The battered G9 Rigger shed several hull plates in Coruscant's upper atmosphere, her static discharge ports were fouled, the navicomputer insisted it was three parsecs rimward of Devaron, and the pilot's console was filled with red alert lights.

But the freighter made it to orbit around Mandalore without falling apart, and Obi-Wan set a course for Sundari. He coaxed the struggling *Twilight* over the blinding white sands, trying to keep her from pitching upward as warning lights flashed and malfunctioning instruments beeped for attention. The moon Concordia was rising, a green half circle in the bright sky.

The *Twilight* lurched on final approach to Sundari, trying to go into a spin before Obi-Wan coaxed her into a low hover above the docks instead. The freighter shuddered and a loud grinding noise began somewhere belowdecks. As she began to smoke, Obi-Wan brought her down the last few meters. It was more of a controlled fall than a landing, but they were down.

Obi-Wan persuaded the landing ramp to lower itself and strode off the ship, peering at Sundari through the bladelike lenses of Rako Hardeen's helmet. A Mandalorian commando approached, wearing red-and-black armor. The man cocked his head curiously at the smoking freighter.

"You better get your ship looked at," the commando said.

A piece of the *Twilight* fell off with a clang. Behind his helmet, Obi-Wan winced.

"Oh, it's my friend's ship," Obi-Wan said. "He told me it was perfectly fine. I'm terribly sorry about that."

"Do you have a landing permit?" the commando asked, after deciding no other malfunction was imminent.

Obi-Wan patted at the pockets of his jumpsuit.

"Um, I think I left it in the ship," he said. "Come with me and I'll get it."

The commando followed Obi-Wan back up the ramp. The sounds of a short, sharp struggle followed. A few minutes later, a figure in red-and-black Mandalorian armor walked back down the ramp, adjusting his helmet.

From a distance, Bo-Katan and the Nite Owls watched as Obi-Wan entered the occupied city of Sundari.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Satine sat alone in her cell once more, wishing there were some way for her to send her thoughts across the stars, to warn Obi-Wan that he was walking into a trap.

The door to her cell rattled, then opened. A commando stood there in red-and-black armor.

"Here to do more of your master's bidding?" Satine asked, voice thick with contempt.

The commando stepped closer.

"I do my own bidding," he said, the helmet's filtering turning the voice harsh—but also somehow familiar.

Then the commando reached up and removed his helmet.

"Obi-Wan!" Satine gasped.

Before the Jedi could move, Satine had wrapped her arms around him. Obi-Wan smiled. Then Satine looked at him, her initial joy clouding over, leaving her looking worried and frightened.

"Are you alone?" she asked.

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "The Jedi Council and Galactic Senate will be of no help to us here."

He led her down the cellblock toward the elevators, making certain they were not being followed.

"I trust you have an escape plan, then?" Satine asked.

"As always, my dear," Obi-Wan said, putting his helmet in place once more. The elevator doors opened, revealing one of Maul's commandos. Obi-Wan pushed Satine inside in gruff silence. The commando gave them a once-over as the elevator began to descend.

"There's no record of a prison transfer here," he said.

"The orders came from upstairs," Obi-Wan explained.

Apparently satisfied, the commando looked away. Satine's shoulders sagged in relief.

Then the man turned back to Obi-Wan.

"What's the authorization code?" he asked.

Obi-Wan brought his fist up with Jedi speed. The

commando was unconscious before his body hit the floor.

Always violence, Satine thought, but didn't say anything.

The doors opened and Satine and Obi-Wan dashed across the landing platform to Obi-Wan's waiting speeder bike. Another commando chased after them, yelling for them to halt.

"It's the Duchess!" he said into his comlink. "She's getting away!"

The speeder bike had shrunk to a tiny dot amid Sundari's traffic before he could draw his blaster.

Obi-Wan sped across the city, zipping past airspeeders and delivery hovertrucks and startled swoop drivers, while Satine pressed herself against his back. Now he could hear the sound of blaster fire and the roar of jetpacks above the wind whistling past his ears.

He juked and weaved in and out of Sundari's traffic lanes, trusting the Force to maneuver him out of harm's way and wondering if that trust would be enough. The Republic's clone troopers swore you never heard the blaster bolt that killed you. Obi-Wan wasn't sure how they could be certain of this, since no one who knew for sure could share the information. He was reluctant to find out himself.

They shot through the tunnel connecting the docks to the rest of the city and came to a skidding stop, leaping off the

speeder bike as blaster bolts hissed past them. Ahead of them sat the *Twilight*, waiting on her landing gear with her ramp down. Obi-Wan hurried Satine up the ramp and flung himself into the pilot's seat, toggling the freighter's laser cannons and hoping they wouldn't decide that this was a good time to malfunction.

They were working—cannon fire forced the commandos to scatter. The *Twilight* lifted off sluggishly, blasterfire thumping into her belly armor and wings.

"Is this thing going to fly?" Satine asked doubtfully.

"Of course it will fly!" Obi-Wan replied, adding a silent prayer for the battered freighter not to prove him wrong.

Two commandos ducked their heads and braced themselves, leaving the rockets on their jetpacks aimed directly at the *Twilight*. Obi-Wan paled and tried to coax more lift from the freighter. Blasters were no threat to her, but rockets could do substantial damage.

He heard the rockets whistling through the air. Then the *Twilight* shuddered. Sparks flew out of the cockpit's consoles and electricity began to crawl across the instruments. Alarms blared and the freighter began to spin.

"Brace yourself," Obi-Wan warned Satine.

He tried to wrestle the *Twilight* back onto a proper trajectory, but found the steering completely unresponsive. She was

a hunk of metal, responding to no commands except those of physics.

The nose dipped and the landing platform seemed to spin crazily beneath them.

"Let's get out of here!" Obi-Wan yelled, shoving Satine ahead of him. They stumbled down the corridor connecting the cockpit with the rear cargo hold, the ship whirling around them. Satine stumbled and Obi-Wan barely managed to grab her and stop her from being thrown out of the open back of the freighter. Thick smoke was pouring through every conduit and seam in the hull now.

Obi-Wan put his arm around Satine and they jumped from the back of the *Twilight*. He had no time to call upon the Force to cushion his fall, and the impact with the landing platform knocked the air out of his lungs. The *Twilight* smashed into the deck nearby and toppled over the side of the platform with a shriek of metal. A moment later he heard the boom of an explosion below them.

Obi-Wan tried to get up. He needed to see if Satine had been badly injured. But he couldn't. His vision was blurry, and his body refused to obey him.

He strained to focus on two figures walking down the platform toward them.

"No," he muttered. "It can't be."

But it was. Darth Maul and Savage Opress were the masterminds behind Satine's downfall.

Obi-Wan opened himself to the Force, letting it flow into him and calling on it for strength. He got unsteadily to his feet, still dizzy, and ignited his lightsaber. Satine was lying on the platform nearby. There was no time to check on her.

Obi-Wan stumbled toward the two brothers, lightsaber held uncertainly in front of him, like a man with a cane.

Maul stretched out his hand and Obi-Wan gagged, feet kicking uselessly as Maul held him in midair. He tried to break Maul's Force grip, but didn't have the strength.

Savage picked up Satine's limp body and threw the unconscious former Duchess over one broad shoulder. Maul looked at Obi-Wan contemptuously, then hurled the Jedi back onto the platform. Obi-Wan landed in a heap at the feet of the Sith Lord's commandos.

"We meet again, Kenobi," Maul sneered. "Welcome to my world. Take them back to the palace."

The commandos dragged the helpless Jedi behind them. Obi-Wan tried to resist, but his vision was becoming blurry again, and there was a roaring in his ears. He bumped his head and everything went black.

By the time Obi-Wan could think and move again, Maul's commandos had put him in shackles and taken him to the royal palace. They led him to the royal chamber, where Savage stood guard over Satine. Almec stood to one side, looking wary, as Maul paced in front of Obi-Wan, his mechanical legs whirring and whining.

"Your noble flaw is a weakness shared by you and the Duchess," Maul said.

He lifted his hand and Obi-Wan waited for the invisible fingers of the dark side to close around his throat. But nothing happened.

Satine began to gag and lifted her hands to her throat, eyes wild.

Obi-Wan stared at Maul, face grown pale.

Maul smiled.

"You should have chosen the dark side, Master Jedi," he said.

Satine gasped for air. Obi-Wan's eyes found hers.

"Obi-Wan . . . " she managed to say, struggling with the effort. Maul turned his outstretched fingers into a claw and Obi-Wan saw Satine struggling to resist him.

"Your emotions betray you," Maul said. "Your fear—and yes, your anger. Let your anger deepen your hate."

"Don't listen to him, Obi," Satine said between gasps.

"Quiet," Savage growled at her.

"You can kill me, but you will never destroy me," Obi-Wan said to Maul. "It takes strength to resist the dark side. Only the weak embrace it."

"It is more powerful than you know," Maul replied, refusing to be baited.

"And those who oppose it are more powerful than you'll ever be," Obi-Wan said.

He lifted his chin and stared at Maul.

"I know where you're from," Obi-Wan said. "I've been to your village. I know the decision to join the dark side wasn't yours. The Nightsisters made it for you."

Savage turned his attention from Satine to his Master. Maul whirled on Obi-Wan, fury in his burning eyes.

"Silence!" Maul barked.

Satine fought for air.

"You think you know me?" Maul asked. "It was I who sat for years thinking of nothing but you, nothing but this moment. And now the perfect tool for my vengeance is in front of us."

His outstretched hand was now a fist. Satine was frantic, helpless.

"Maybe I won't kill you," Maul said. "But I will make you share my pain, Kenobi."

The commandos forced Obi-Wan to his knees.

Maul ignited the darksaber.

He looked at Obi-Wan for a long moment, then turned and walked slowly toward Satine. The blade of the darksaber whined eagerly in his hand.

Satine saw Maul coming. She looked past him, locking her eyes on Obi-Wan as Maul drew back the darksaber and rammed it into her body.

The commandos released Obi-Wan as Maul stepped back and Satine slumped to the bright, polished floor. Obi-Wan rushed to the Duchess's side, cradling her head in his arms. She reached up tentatively and stroked his beard.

"Satine," he managed, voice breaking.

"Remember, my dear Obi-Wan," she said quietly, eyes already dimming. "No matter what, don't let go of what you believe in. I never did."

Obi-Wan managed to nod.

Savage looked up at Maul, who was staring down at the Jedi Master and the dead Duchess.

"Do we kill him now, brother?" Savage asked.

"No," Maul said. "Imprison him below. Let him drown in his misery."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Mas Amedda arrived for his afternoon meeting with Supreme Chancellor Palpatine and found the Republic's leader staring out the window of his office, gnawing at his lower lip as airspeeders, shuttles, and military vehicles zipped past Coruscant's towering skyscrapers.

"My Lord?" the Chagrian Vice Chancellor asked, his blue skin darkening with worry.

"There is a disturbance in the Force," Palpatine said. "Prepare my ship."

Amedda had kept many of Palpatine's secrets for years,

and knew his moods better than anyone else on the Republic's capital planet. Whatever was troubling the Supreme Chancellor was urgent—and for a being who often thought in terms of decades or even centuries, few things qualified as urgent.

Amedda hurried from the office, already activating his comlink.



A squad of commandos led a shackled Obi-Wan into the royal palace's cellblock, dim and gloomy now that night had fallen.

Suddenly, a slim figure in Mandalorian armor appeared out of nowhere, kicking the lead commando in the face and snapping his helmet back.

"It's the rebels!" the man yelled, as steel-armored warriors swarmed the Maul loyalists.

Within seconds the guards were lying motionless on the floor. Obi-Wan looked around in surprise as the woman who'd led the attack unlocked his binders.

"Sorry, I don't believe we've met," Obi-Wan said. "You are?"

"Bo-Katan," the woman said gruffly. "I'm here to rescue you. That's all you need to know."

She handed over his lightsaber.

"Sounds good to me," Obi-Wan said, returning the weapon to its normal place on his belt.

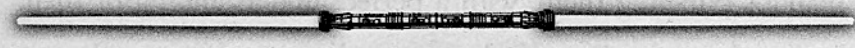
One of the warriors held out a Mandalorian jetpack.

"You ever use one of these before?" Bo-Katan asked.

"No," Obi-Wan said. "But in this case, I'm a fast learner."

She eyed him skeptically, then nodded.

"Let's go," Bo-Katan said.



The unmarked shuttle landed on the royal palace's platform, reserved for Mandalore's rulers and their most important advisors. The ramp lowered and a hooded figure in dark robes descended. The commandos rushing to intercept him reached for their throats, gagging, and the cloaked figure swept past them without a sideways glance, gaze fixed straight ahead.



Lifting off from the palace alongside Bo-Katan and her soldiers, Obi-Wan was briefly worried he wouldn't be able to control his Mandalorian jetpack. It would be ridiculous to be broken out of prison only to immediately fly off in the wrong direction and smash into the side of a building.

Fortunately, he got the hang of it quickly enough. The trick was to angle your body slightly in the direction you wanted to

go and to keep your arms and legs in the same plane, so they wouldn't create air resistance and send you tumbling or spinning through the air. In very different circumstances it might even have been fun.

But Obi-Wan's skill was nothing compared with what Bo-Katan and her warriors could do. They were true acrobats, able to turn somersaults in midair while firing back at the commandos pursuing them, with a perfect understanding of their bodies, their jetpacks, and what the smallest movement or change in position would mean. It was amazing that his Jedi forebears had fought whole planets full of Mandalorians with such weapons and training. He didn't envy them the assignment.

Bo-Katan and her soldiers dodged a fusillade of blaster bolts from a new group of Maul's commandos joining the chase, then zipped into the transportation tunnel that led to the docks, roaring past a cargo-hauler driven by a terrified Rodian. They emerged to find a pitched battle under way between Bo-Katan's fighters and Maul's loyalists.

Bo-Katan surveyed the number of commandos Maul had sent after them and shook her head in wonder.

"Maul must want you dead," she said.

"You have no idea," Obi-Wan replied.

The feeling had begun as a faint stirring in the Force, like the tiniest ripple of something moving slowly through deep water, far away but drawing steadily closer. It intensified, until it felt like the Force itself was roiling, heaving like the sea in the grip of an enormous storm.

"I sense a presence," Maul warned Savage. "A presence I haven't felt since . . . "

And then Maul knew.

"Master," he said, leaning forward on the throne.

The commandos guarding the royal chamber reached for their throats. As Maul watched, an unseen force lifted them high in the air, then slammed them to the floor, where they lay motionless in their red-and-black armor.

The doors opened, then closed behind a figure in dark robes. A deep cowl hid most of the face, leaving only a pale chin and a downturned mouth visible. To most eyes the man in those simple robes of rough cloth was unremarkable, just another being making his way in the universe. But to those who could feel the Force he was anything but ordinary. To them, he was a dark sun blazing with power that was simultaneously hypnotizing and terrifying to behold.

Darth Sidious, the reigning Dark Lord of the Sith, had come to Mandalore.

Savage stared at the new arrival in astonishment, transfixed

by the sight. Maul felt himself leap from the throne, mechanical legs clacking down the steps and toward his old Master. The motion was almost automatic, involuntary. Maul's earliest memories were of that hooded figure—his tests, his teachings, and also his torments. He had been Maul's father, his protector, his torturer.

He had been everything.

Maul halted before Sidious and kneeled, bowing his head.

"Master," he said simply.

Sidious stopped. For a moment all was silent.

"I am most impressed to see you have survived your injuries," he said, the voice as rough and cracked as Maul remembered.

"I used your training, Master," Maul said. "And I have built all of this in hopes of returning to your side."

Sidious lifted his head slightly, and Maul saw his yellow eyes beneath the hood. They were as cold as space.

"How unfortunate that you are attempting to deceive me," Sidious said.

"Master?" Maul asked.

"You have become a rival," Sidious declared.

He raised his arms and both Maul and Savage flew through the air, smashing into the elegantly patterned walls of the royal

chamber and crashing to the floor. Maul sprang to his feet and ignited his lightsaber. Savage did the same. The two Zabraks stared grimly at the hooded figure.

Sidious retrieved a pair of elegant-looking lightsabers from within the depths of his robes and ignited them. The blades turned his pale face a hellish red.

Maul and Savage didn't waste time seeking an advantageous position. They simply charged, blades humming, trying to overpower Sidious with the animal ferocity of their attack. Sidious caught their sabers on his, the weapons howling and crackling where they touched. Maul saw that Savage was startled by the seemingly frail man's enormous strength.

Maul stared at his Master's face. He saw the strain as Sidious called upon the Force to keep the brothers at bay. But there was something else there, too—a terrible pleasure. Sidious began to grin.



On the docks, all was chaos. Mandalorians loyal to Bo-Katan fired their blasters at their former comrades in red-and-black armor, or tried to incinerate them with blasts from their flamethrowers, or wrestled with them, knives clutched in their fists. Laserfire sang and men screamed.

A Mandalorian attack craft settled onto the platform. Its ramp lowered and more of Maul's commandos raced out to join the fight.

Bo-Katan hadn't liked the odds when they'd first reached the docks, and she liked them even less now. She had imagined she might die in a firefight—every warrior knew that was a possibility. She had even imagined it might be a necessary sacrifice, the price of seeing the New Mandalorians overthrown and her people's traditions restored. But she had never imagined those trying to kill her would be other members of the Death Watch—men and women she had trained with and fought alongside.

It was a stupid, pointless way to die, Bo-Katan thought, but it seemed increasingly likely that would be her fate—and soon after that, Mandalore would be ruled by a renegade Sith, a false Mandalore who would use the Death Watch as enforcers in his ever-expanding empire of crime and dishonor.

That wasn't what Pre Vizsla had dreamed of, or what she had fought for.

There was another way, Bo-Katan realized—one that might not save her life, but that could deny Maul his victory. It would have been unthinkable even a day ago, but now, somehow, it was the only way.

She activated her comlink and gave a short, sharp command.

When Bo-Katan heard the whine of the *Kom'rk*-class transport's engines descending from above them, she caught Obi-Wan's eye where the bearded Jedi stood deflecting blaster bolts with the blue blade of his lightsaber. She gestured at the ship as its pilot brought it down on the landing platform. Obi-Wan nodded and raised his saber. The two raced for the ramp, blaster bolts sizzling all around them.

Obi-Wan was halfway up the ramp before he realized the Mandalorian woman hadn't followed.

"Go back to your Republic and tell them what has happened," Bo-Katan yelled.

Obi-Wan cocked his head at her, surprised.

"That would likely lead to a Republic invasion of Mandalore," he said.

"Yes . . . and Maul will die," Bo-Katan said. "But Mandalore will survive. We always survive. Now go!"

Bo-Katan raced back into the fight, blasters spitting fire. She did not look back.



The three-pronged duel between Sidious, and Maul and Savage had moved, like some deadly ballet, from the throne room to the steps of the palace. Sidious's lightsabers twirled swiftly and elegantly, turning aside the furious blows Maul and

Savage rained down upon him as the three Sith leapt and spun.

Maul had fought his Master many times, starting when he was little more than a child and continuing through his apprenticeship. His body bore innumerable scars from those duels—lessons in the peril of being too slow or too quick, too weak or too distracted.

During Maul's apprenticeship he had always known that Sidious had been willing to kill him. The Sith had not survived their centuries of exile by being sentimental, and a student who couldn't stand against his Master in a mere training exercise was worse than useless—he was a waste of valuable resources better used elsewhere. But Maul had never faced his Master when he was actually *trying* to kill him.

Maul had grown more powerful since the last time he'd been in Sidious's presence, before the Neimoidian invasion of Naboo had turned disastrous and Obi-Wan had bested him inside the Theed power core. His hermitage on Lotho Minor, his lessons on Umbara, his restoration by Mother Talzin, and his training of Savage had all strengthened him, made him a more worthy vessel for the dark side to fill with its power.

But strong as he had become, Maul found himself in awe of Sidious. The Sith Lord was astonishingly fast and efficient, and the Force flowed through him effortlessly. His sabers stabbed and slashed through the smallest hole in an opponent's

guard, his movements never carried him a millimeter out of position, and he could sense every attack Maul or Savage made before it developed.

Maul tried to slash past Sidious's guard, only to find his Master had given ground, causing Maul to extend his arms too far and leave himself slightly unbalanced. It was the smallest stumble, easily corrected, but Sidious saw it—and pounced before Maul could draw himself back. Snarling, he reached out with the Force and slammed Maul against the wall, leaving him lying stunned in a heap.

Savage knew the dangers of facing the Sith Lord alone, and pressed his attack before Sidious could draw his hand back from Force-shoving Maul into the wall. Teeth bared, Savage windmilled his double saber, hoping to disarm Sidious or force him to give ground. If he did, that would allow the yellow-and-black Zabrak to follow his initial attack with a lightning-quick thrust that would penetrate Sidious's defenses and wound or even kill him.

Maul tried to shake off his attack, rocketing up from the floor. Sidious neatly side-stepped Savage's assault, drawing back as the massive Zabrak raised his double-bladed saber high to try to pummel him with it.

Savage didn't think Sidious was fast enough to take advantage of the brief opening in his defenses, but he was wrong.

Sidious rammed one of his blades through Savage's black armor, the glowing crimson tip of the saber appearing between his shoulder blades. Savage gasped, his saber tumbling from his grasp. Sidious yanked his weapon back and Savage seemed to hang suspended for a moment, as if he were being levitated with the Force. Then he crashed to the ground.

Sidious stepped back as Maul rushed to his fallen brother's side.

A mist seemed to rise from Savage's body, emerging from his wounds and then from his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. As Maul and Sidious watched, Savage's horns shrank and the massive bands of muscle melted away from his chest and shoulders. The last misty remnants of Mother Talzin's magic grew hazy and tattered, then dispersed and vanished, leaving the dying Savage lying in the shell of his now-oversized armor.

His eyes turned to Maul.

"Brother, I am an unworthy apprentice," Savage said. "I am not like you. I never was."

He took a last breath and lay still.

Maul looked up, saber in his grasp, and stared into Darth Sidious's blazing eyes.

"Remember the first and only reality of the Sith," Sidious said. "There can only be two, and you are no longer my apprentice. You have been replaced."

Sidious raised his saber and flew at Maul, who parried desperately, his mechanical legs whirring as he sought to counter his former Master's blows. Sidious's sabers were a blur, a whirling cage of deadly plasma. Maul danced away from one blow, then reversed his movement to avoid another, and then there were too many to count, and then there were even more than that.

Maul's saber spun out of his hand, bouncing away across the floor. Then Sidious seized his former apprentice with the Force, hurling him against the wall. Maul's vision swam. He tried to get up, but realized he was already in the air, held aloft by the Force. Sidious slammed him into the floor. Then Maul was off the ground again, legs kicking for purchase in empty air. He could taste blood in his mouth. His head hit the wall with a sickening crunch.

A rhyme crept into his head, a nagging sing-song bit of poetry.

Far above, far above,
We don't know where we'll fall.
Far above, far above,
What once was great is rendered small.

Maul could no longer remember where he had heard it, or what it meant. He was broken, helpless, useless.

"No," Maul heard himself gasp. "Have mercy. Please . . ."

"There is no mercy," Sidious said.

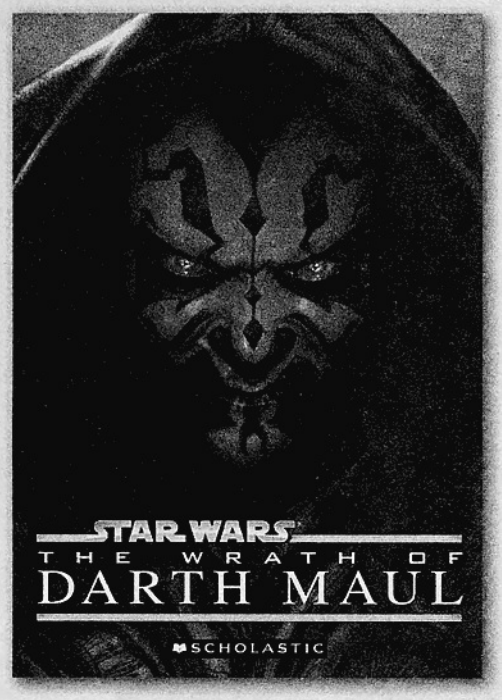
Bolts of energy ripped out from the Sith Lord's fingers, tendrils of brilliant blue and purple that danced across Maul's tattooed skin and ripped through his muscles, his organs. His mechanical legs convulsed, shorting out.

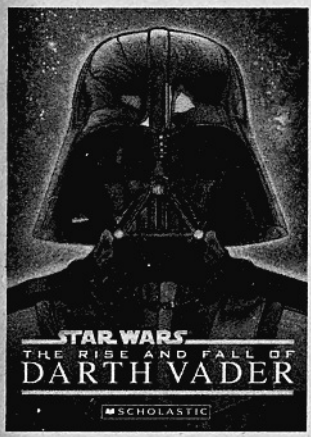
"You belong to me," Sidious said. "Your existence is now perfectly meaningless."

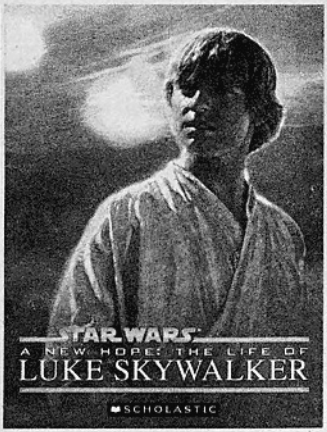
He stretched out his fingers and the energy tore through Maul again. Sidious watched the lightning build in intensity, his eyes unblinking, his teeth gritted in a triumphant, terrible smile.

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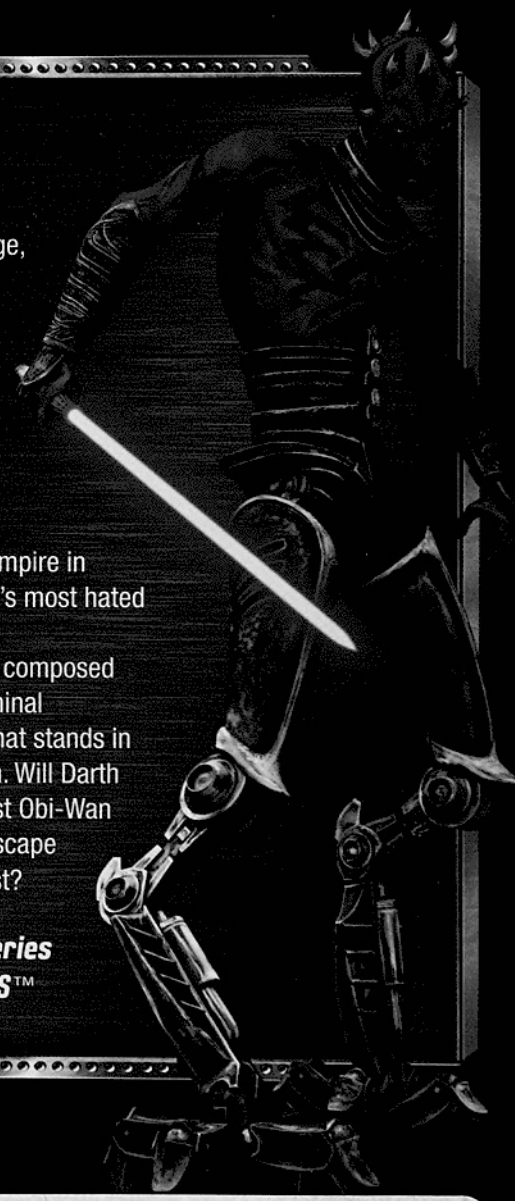
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